

4th
Date

You Were

Experienced,

I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako



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Prologue

A bird soared through the clear sky as though it were drawing an arc on a canvas. In the middle of this November day, gentle sunlight poured down on Minami-Ikebukuro Park.

As I lay directly on the green lawn with my girlfriend beside me, I didn't mind the faint prickling of the grass against my head and arms when I thought about how she had to deal with that too.

Next to each of our heads were identical cups with Blue Bottle Coffee's blue logo on them.

What brought my mood down a little was the fact that I had thoughts of my cram school classes bouncing around in my mind. It was Saturday, and I had to go to cram school later. But since Runa had come to Ikebukuro, I was spending time with her until then.

"That must be nice..." she suddenly uttered.

"What is?"

As I looked over to her, I found her staring directly at the blue sky.

"Can't birds go, like, anywhere?" Runa asked.

"And you can't?"

She didn't reply to my question and didn't look my way either.

Runa reached out toward the sky as though to grasp at something. "I've always wanted to become free," she said.

"Free from what?"

This time, she finally looked at me. I was relieved to see the gentle smile adorning her face.

"I dunno... My dad doesn't really care what I do, and grandma is busy with her own stuff, so I don't really have anyone getting on my case much. I get a decent

allowance too.” With a small smile appearing on her face, Runa looked at the sky again. “Still, I’ve felt kinda constrained there.” Her smile vanished and was replaced with a serious look. “I’ve always wanted to go back to that house, where it was all five of us. Where I had Dad, Mom, my older sister...and Maria.”

It was as though her sad voice were meant for the sky above.

“There isn’t a house like that for me anywhere on Earth now.”

When she said those words, her profile looked as frail as an elaborate sugar sculpture. It was beautiful enough to leave a strong impression on me.

Chapter 1

One Sunday in late November, when the air had gotten significantly cooler, I found myself at a family restaurant in Shinagawa.

We sat at a table for four with couches for seats. Runa was beside me, and across the table from us were Yamana-san and Sekiya-san.

That's right—simply put, this was a double date.

"Man, I'm looking forward to the dolphin show!" said Runa in excitement, eating her chocolate sundae dessert. As usual, she wore a knit top with exposed shoulders and long sleeves suitable for autumn and winter. It was cute how they were basically "moe sleeves" since they were oversize.

We would be going to a nearby aquarium soon. We'd met up here to have lunch and make sure that all of us were ready for the dolphin show in the afternoon.

"Dolphins can jump even though they're fish! Isn't that crazy?" asked Runa in mild amazement.

"Huh? B-But dolphins aren't fish—they're mammals," I replied.

"For real?! Wait, there are animals in the ocean that aren't fish?"

"Well... There's crabs and starfish and the like, right?"

"Yeah, I get that!" she said. "But, like, you know how dolphins look like animals? Why aren't they fish?"

I did kinda understand what she meant, but it wasn't like I knew a whole lot about animals myself, so I could only force a smile when she was expecting an expert answer.

"Wait, what are mammals again?" asked Runa. "I feel like we learned that in biology class, but I forgot..."

"Um... They're animals that come from their mother's stomach rather than from eggs..." I replied.

“What else?”

“Um, there’s also... Uhh, what was it...”

“They breathe using their lungs,” said Sekiya-san from across the table. “That’s why they come to the surface to breathe—so they don’t drown.”

“Is that why they jump?” asked Runa.

“Nah, it would be too inefficient if they jumped every time they needed to take a breath,” he said. “They do it for a different reason. Some say it’s part of courting; others think they do it for cleanliness.”

Without meaning to, Runa and I both voiced our impressed replies in unison. “Huh...”

“Do you like dolphins, Sekiya-san?” I then asked him.

“It’s more like my elective subject is biology.”

That explained things. He really was serious about college exams.

Meanwhile, somebody was staring at him with exceptionally high esteem.

“Senpai, you’re amazing...!”

It was Yamana-san. Sitting across from Runa, she’d already had a passionate gaze set on Sekiya-san for some time now.

“R-Runa... Are we *really* not getting in their way here?” I asked quietly.

Yamana-san hadn’t looked at anything or anyone except Sekiya-san for a while now. Her cheeks were constantly flushed, and her eyes were a little moist.

“It’s fine. Nicole was the one who suggested going on a double date,” replied Runa in an equally hushed voice.

“But isn’t this their first time properly meeting up since then?”

It had been nearly two weeks since the cultural festival, but since Sekiya-san remained swamped with his studies and Yamana-san had her part-time jobs, they apparently hadn’t had a proper date until today. Being new to double dates, I was worried if it was okay for outsiders to be present at such an important occasion.

“It’s okay, trust me,” Runa said. “Nicole and I have been saying that we should go on a double date when we both get boyfriends for forever now. She was even all excited about it on the phone last night, saying it would definitely be fun since Sekiya-san is your friend.”

“I-I see...”

Still, wouldn’t it have been better to put this off for later...? I couldn’t shake off that thought. It didn’t look like Yamana-san had any attention to spare for us at the moment.

“Ah!” Yamana-san suddenly cried out. Her voice sounded childlike and not at all like the one we’d grown used to.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sekiya-san.

Yamana-san pointed at her lap. “I got ice cream on myself...”

Just like Runa, she’d been eating a chocolate sundae. Apparently, some had melted and slipped off her spoon as she’d carried it to her mouth.

“Wow, you better wipe that quick. It could leave a stain.”

“My hands are all sticky. Could you do it for me, senpai...?”

“You can’t be serious...”

At that point, Sekiya-san glanced my way and our eyes almost met, so I hurriedly pretended I wasn’t watching.

“Fine...” he said.

Sekiya-san wiped Yamana-san’s lap with the moist towelette from the table that he’d previously used.

I couldn’t see it from where I sat, but today, Yamana-san was wearing long boots and a miniskirt. I could surmise that the ice cream had fallen on her zettai ryouiki... That is, that patch of exposed skin between two pieces of fabric that men find rather stimulating.

If Runa had asked me to do the same thing, I couldn’t imagine I’d be able to stay composed. *That’s Sekiya-san for you, I guess.*

“Ah!” came Yamana-san’s cute voice again. She was looking at him with

upturned eyes, rosy cheeks, and a seductive expression.

“Wh-What is it?!” he asked.

“Senpai, it tickles...”

“I wiped it for you because you asked! Don’t go using that voice on me!”

It looked like even Sekiya-san couldn’t fully hide his discomposure when faced with this situation. He was blushing and his voice raised in pitch.

Runa giggled beside me. She clearly found the sight of the two heartwarming.

“It’s like they’re in their own world,” she whispered to me, bringing her face closer. Runa gazed at me with the eyes of a prankster. “Wanna be like them and act all sugary sweet today?”

My hand had been resting on the couch, and she placed hers on top of mine.

“Huh...?!”

I got flustered—Sekiya-san and Yamana-san were right in front of us. But then again, they were preoccupied at the moment.

I nervously looked at Runa. “O-Okay,” I replied with an awkward nod.

Runa smiled happily. “Yay! Love you, Ryuto!”

Like an off-season sunflower, her broad smile made my heartbeat distractingly loud for a while.

After we left the family restaurant, we headed to the aquarium.

When we got inside, we found ourselves in a jellyfish exhibit. The room had a romantic atmosphere as the illuminated aquariums shone fantastically in the dark. Runa and I held hands as we looked at jellyfish glowing blue and purple—the mood couldn’t get any more date-like. The atmosphere made me nervous and my heart raced. I really was an introvert through and through.

“Wow, that’s so pretty! It’s floating!” exclaimed Runa, her eyes glued to a jellyfish. My heart pounded as I was captivated by her lovely profile.

Then, glancing beside us, I saw Sekiya-san and Yamana-san standing in front of a different aquarium. Yamana-san had an arm linked with one of Sekiya-san’s

and was clinging to it as though pressing her chest into it.

“Oh, senpai, you!” I heard her say.

I couldn’t hear what Sekiya-san said back to her, but Yamana-san’s voice was sweet. She pressed her breasts against his arm even more.

“Whoa...”

If Runa had done something like that to me, I couldn’t imagine retaining my sanity. I had a newfound respect for Sekiya-san—he appeared unruffled as he looked at the aquarium.

“I could look at them forever...” said Runa, bringing me back to my senses.

“Y-Yeah,” I replied. I’d barely looked at the jellyfish at all, so I focused on the aquarium in front of me in a hurry.

“Hey, are jellyfish fish?”

Her question took me by surprise and I had to think for a bit. “Huh? I don’t think so...”

“Then what are they?”

“Ehh? Well...”

I wished I could give a cool reply like Sekiya-san had, but it would only make me a liar if I said some crap I’d come up with on the spot just to sound like I knew a lot of stuff.

I had no other choice. “I dunno...” I replied.

“Yeah... Who knows...” added Runa.



Runa didn't look unsatisfied at my reply and simply tilted her head in puzzlement.

Wanting to recover somehow, I racked my brains for any trivia I knew about jellyfish. A weird sense of pride prevented me from looking things up on my phone, as though doing that would count as a loss.

"Oh, by the way, there's this thing I once read somewhere..." I said timidly, my internal search having finally hit upon something. "Apparently, jellyfish can't swim."

"What?! No way!"

I grew flustered, not having expected this random tidbit of information I happened to know to pique Runa's interest so much.

"But wait, then what do you call that?" she asked, pointing at the jellyfish in the aquarium that appeared to be "swimming."

"They just drift, apparently."

"Whaaat?!"

"Supposedly, they'd sink if there weren't any water currents..."

"I see..." Runa seemed to be genuinely surprised. "I thought it was completely different. Like I thought jellyfish could swim freely, and how great that was." She gazed at the aquarium, hanging her head a little. "So they live their lives getting pushed around by the currents..."

"Disappointed?" I asked, wondering if I should've never mentioned this.

She shook her head slightly. "No. They just feel a bit closer because of it."

"Closer?"

Was she saying that she herself lived her life getting pushed around by the currents?

Come to think of it...

"Akari's funny like that. She's not easily swayed by people and pushes forward to get what she wants."

Runa had said that when Tanikita-san had parted with us the day we'd played airsoft. As she'd watched Tanikita-san leave, there'd been admiration in her trembling eyes.

Runa evidently didn't think she was free to live as she pleased.

"I've always wanted to become free."

I didn't really get what she'd meant by that, but the sad look on her face afterward was still stuck in my mind.

"I've always wanted to go back to that house, where it was all five of us. Where I had Dad, Mom, my older sister...and Maria."

It wasn't clear to me why, but it appeared that the reason Runa didn't feel free had something to do with the issues in her family.

I want to help you. If only I could set you free... But I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

How frustrating... I was her boyfriend, and yet...

"Ryuto?"

Runa's voice brought me back to my senses.

"What's wrong? You're making a serious face," she said.

"Oh, it's nothing... I was just wondering what jellyfish are if they really aren't fish."

"What? You've still been thinking about that for me? Thanks!" Her face lit up at my desperate reply. "Hold on, I'm gonna look it up! ...Huh? What's a 'Cnidaria'? Anyway, it's that!" Runa frowned as she looked at her phone. "'Cnidaria' sounds like some kinda pocket critter!" She laughed innocently and was back to her usual cheerful self.

"Cnidaria is a phylum. It's a level of classification in biology," explained Sekiya-san. He had suddenly approached us and naturally had Yamana-san clinging to his arm.

"How long are you going to be stuck on those moon jelly? Let's go already, lovebirds."

“Lovebirds?!” I said.

“Well you’re one to talk!” Runa blushed as she’d said that to the pair sticking close to each other as they walked.

Yamana-san smiled at her with a blush on her face that was no less intense. She looked happy from the bottom of her heart.

“Gotta say, though, it’s unbelievable... Of all people, I never thought I’d see Yamana-san be like that...” I said, the matter dawning on me as we walked through the building.

“Nicole’s a totally innocent maiden when it comes to her senpai. She’s always been like that,” replied Runa.

“I-I see...”

It was really hard to believe we were talking about the girl rumored to have beaten up twenty delinquents on the banks of the Arakawa River.

“Anyway, isn’t Nicole’s getup pretty amazing today?” I asked.

Sekiya-san and Yamana-san were just a few steps ahead of us on the escalator going up, and I was once again taken aback by her looks.

Her tall boots with sharp stiletto heels made you think of a queen. The skin of her upper thighs peeked suggestively from under her denim miniskirt that looked like it was halfway torn to pieces. Her blouse exposed her shoulders and, to a large extent, her chest. Her black bra, one that looked like the kind a girl would wear to show it off, peeked out around her cleavage. A guy would have a really hard time finding where to look if his girlfriend wore stuff like this.

I did think I’d grown much more used to gyaru fashion thanks to Runa, but Yamana-san must’ve been so motivated when choosing her outfit today that I couldn’t help but do a double take.

“Heh heh, Nicole plans to seal the deal today,” said Runa with a giggle.

“Huh? ‘Seal the deal’...?” I asked.

“Well, you know. What else could it be? She even took time off from work for it.”

I see... So she wants to get him in the mood to spend the night with him, huh.

“Wait... Sekiya-san said he’s going to the study room after this,” I said.

“Whaaat, for real? He studies even on days like this?!”

“He *does* have exams coming up. While I have over a year left, his exams are early next year.”

“Makes sense... Poor Nicole.” Runa turned and looked dejected as though she was the one who’d be forced to wait. “She’s really been holding herself back these past two weeks. She avoided messaging him on LINE as much as possible so she wouldn’t distract him from his studies. She would even go wait in front of the station after work to see his face for just a moment when he left cram school.”

“Well, considering when they started dating... Those who have exams coming up are about to get to the most important part of the year. Sekiya-san says he studies thirteen hours a day, so I guess he wouldn’t have time.”

“No way! But wait, there’s twenty-four in a day... That means he’s studying for over half of it! There’s no way I could do that—I’d die!” Turning pale, Runa assumed the pose depicted in Munch’s *The Scream*. “Man... He should take a break every now and then! And today’s the day!”

Runa appeared to be set on supporting her best friend no matter what.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I replied. My heart was warmed by her cuteness.

The dolphin show was held several times a day at a large stadium that spanned both the first and second floors. There were more than twenty minutes until the next show, but quite a few of the seats were filled already.

“Wow, we’re off to a late start! I didn’t think it would be so popular!” said Yamana-san.

“But wait, there’s plenty of free seats in the front rows!” replied Runa.

“You’re right!”

“Hey, doesn’t it smell like caramel popcorn?”

“Ah, there’s someone eating it over there! Must be nice!”

“Looks delicious!”

As the two girls chatted about this and that, we made our way to the front seats. And as I followed them, something occurred to me.

“Do you think we might get really soaked in the front rows?” I asked.

Looking closely, I noticed that the floor, until around the fourth row from the front, was soaking wet. It might’ve been from the previous show. The other visitors seemed to be aware of this, and those sitting in the front rows looked fully prepared and were wearing what looked like transparent raincoats.

“Still, all the seats in the back are taken... I’ll go buy a few of those things people are wearing,” said Sekiya-san. He then headed to the kiosk in the upper area by himself.

The rest of us started looking for a place to sit.

“Hey, why don’t we sit in the first row while we’re at it?” suggested Yamana-san.

“You’re kidding! That’s scary!” Runa replied in high spirits.

“You might get a shot at touching a dolphin.”

“No way, right?!”

“You never know.”

As the girls excitedly sat in the first row, it seemed like my fate of getting drenched was set in stone.

Sekiya-san returned with four ponchos. “Wow, did you seriously go for the first row?!” he exclaimed in surprise.

“Ah, senpai, is that popcorn?!” Yamana-san asked.

Besides the ponchos, Sekiya-san also had two servings of popcorn with him.

“You were looking at someone eating it earlier and wanted some, so. Here you go.”

“Wait, is it okay for me to have some too?” Runa asked hesitantly as he gave

her the other serving of popcorn.

“Ryuto paid for it. If you want to thank someone, thank your boyfriend.”

“Huh?” I uttered, having done no such thing. But as I looked over at Sekiya-san, he signaled me with his eyes and I got the hint. I would need to remember to pay him for the popcorn later.

“Really?! Thanks, Ryuto! Let’s eat together!” Runa innocently cheered.

We all sat down again.

“Thanks, senpai!” exclaimed Yamana-san, happily putting popcorn in her mouth. “Good thing we both have kind boyfriends.”

“Heh heh, you’re right!” Runa smiled bashfully too.

Wow, this really feels like a double date.

It still didn’t feel real that an introvert like me, someone with no hobbies other than watching gameplay videos, was on a double date with such good-looking people... It felt awkward and a little heartwarming.

Sitting in a line of four, we watched the dolphin show.

While I’d been prepared to get splashed to some degree, the reality easily exceeded my expectations.

“Ahh!”

“This is crazy! Seriously!”

Girls would shout when a dolphin would come near the crowd and dash off with its tail fin. We couldn’t really complain since we were sitting in the first row, but did those dolphins really have to get our faces *that* wet? If we hadn’t been wearing ponchos, we would certainly have been sopping wet all over.

Since this was held in a large stadium with many spectators, it was only natural that the flashy and exciting show with dolphins jumping and swimming in a coordinated manner was matched with music and water effects. The spectacle concluded without any mishaps, keeping the spectators entertained to the end.

“That sure was a lot of water. You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah! I’m glad I hid the remaining popcorn too,” replied Runa.

But as I was about to get up from my seat...

“Ah, I’m drenched!” cried a seductive voice from beside Runa. I could see Yamana-san taking off her rain poncho.

“Oh, wow, Nicole!” uttered Runa in astonishment.

I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Yamana-san’s torso was dripping wet. Her blouse stuck to her skin and you could see through the fabric. The lines of her body stood out clearly. Her outfit had been sexy even before this with her exposed shoulders and cleavage, but now that she was wet, the sight was even more erotic than if she wore a bikini.

“Hey, how’d you get so wet?! Weren’t you wearing the plastic thing?!” exclaimed Sekiya-san. He was surprised too.

“Well, it was hot, so I opened the front...” Touching her wet blouse, Yamana-san shuddered, looking cold. “I’m all soaked... Is there anywhere I can dry off...?”

As she looked at Sekiya-san with upturned eyes and flushed cheeks, even I couldn’t help thinking she was cute and sexy. If Runa said that to me, my lower half would explode.

“Oh wow, look at the time! Why don’t we call it a day here?!” Runa quickly suggested, checking her phone as though she’d just remembered something. She must’ve been trying to help her friend.

And so we all left the aquarium and proceeded to walk to the station.

“Hey Ryuto, what do you think they’ll do after this?” Runa asked.

“Well...”

Honestly, if I were Sekiya-san, I’d go to a place where my girlfriend and I could be alone together. If my girlfriend were to seduce me so openly, even an introverted virgin like me couldn’t keep myself in check.

However, Sekiya-san was a ronin. This was an important time for him, and he’d said he was going to study after this, so...

But as we got to the station and were about to go inside...

“Ryuto,” called out Sekiya-san from where he’d been walking behind us.

I stopped and turned around. “Yeah?”

He took a few steps toward me. “We’re gonna go now.”

“Huh? Oh...”

I realized what he was talking about.

I could tell from the serious, slightly angry look on his face that he was having a lot of trouble staying composed. Beside him, Yamana-san was hanging her head, her face red. She was wearing the loose jacket that he’d had on until now.

“O-Okay... Got it...” I replied, blushing too from the obvious implications of the scene.

I see. So they’re going to do it now... Must be nice...

“Okay, see you tomorrow, Nicole,” said Runa.

“Yeah,” replied Nicole.

After the girls’ brief goodbyes, we parted ways.

“She did it!” Runa said excitedly. When Sekiya-san and Yamana-san began walking toward the station again, she latched onto my arm with both hands. “It is what I think it is, right?”

“Yeah, probably...”

Even a virgin like me could tell from the mood that things were probably heading in *that* direction.

“I wonder where they’re going... Nicole would have to take a long train ride in wet clothes to get back to her place, so that would suck. Maybe they’ll just pick the safe choice and go to Shibuya? I wonder if there’s one of those nearby...”

For a moment, I wondered what she was talking about, but I then quickly realized she was talking about love hotels.

At times like these, I remembered that Runa was *experienced*—it made me a little depressed.

If Shibuya was a “safe choice”...perhaps that meant she’d gone to Shibuya’s love hotels before.

That mention of a “safe choice” lingered with me for a long time after that, coursing through my head. I had to keep squashing down any rising thoughts I had about her past like I was playing whack-a-mole. Eventually, I made myself stop thinking about anything.

It had been a full five months since we’d started dating, and out of all the boyfriends she’d had, I’d been with her the longest and was still with her at the present. Thanks to that, I’d developed a fair amount of confidence as her boyfriend. I didn’t get all spineless anymore like I’d used to.

However, the only thing that sometimes made me feel inferior to her exes was the fact I hadn’t done the deed with her yet.

“Ryuto. ≡”

As we walked, Runa nuzzled her face against my shoulder. The warmth of her hand in mine also served to both make my heart race and bring me relief.

Runa touched me often, but I’d yet to hear from her that she wanted to *do it*. Sometimes, that made me anxious.

Perhaps it wasn’t far off now. Christmas was a month away, so it would be an ideal time for us to have sex for the first time.

“Hey, Ryuto,” began Runa as we rode a train.

“Hm? What is it?”

I turned to look at her. The expression on her face suggested that she was a little unsatisfied.

“You know how you often fall deep into thought when you’re with me?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry...”

“It’s okay. I think that’s what makes you *you*. But, if you’re thinking about something that has to do with me, I wish you’d tell me about it right then and there...”

I felt a slight pang upon seeing the hint of sadness on her face.

“We’re completely different and all,” she said. “We might have misunderstandings, like the other day... So I think we should tell each other our thoughts so it doesn’t come to that again.”

Her words made me recall the recent cultural festival.

“Yeah...” I replied.

“I do think it’s the best when two people can understand each other without words, but even people like that probably didn’t start off that way. It’s not like there are any two identical people out there,” said Runa, hanging her head somewhat. “I think people form that kind of relationship by spending a long time together and coming to understand each other.”

“Right...”

Then, Runa lifted her face. “I want to become that way with you as soon as we can. So...let’s talk a lot, okay?”

Faced with her sparkling eyes fixed on me, I nodded. “Okay. You’re right.”

That said, I couldn’t say “Let’s have sex already” or anything.

“I was just thinking what we should do for Christmas...” I then said in a roundabout way, which prompted a look of realization from Runa.

“Ah, Christmas! Right, it’s next month.” She smiled a little bashfully. “I’ve been giving it some thought, and...wanna come to my place?”

“What?!” Shocked, I involuntarily raised a voice loud enough to make people nearby turn to look at me.

I hadn’t gone to Runa’s house since the day I’d confessed and we’d started dating, after which she’d suddenly suggested I take a shower. Since I had wanted to wait for her to want to have sex with me, I couldn’t just tell her I wanted to go to her room again, given what had transpired between us there. And, fortunately, Runa liked my house and my family—incidentally, my mother was fond of Runa too—so it had become a custom for her to come to my place to study and the like.

“I-Is that okay?” I asked timidly.

Runa nodded with a smile. "Sure. I'll make the best Christmas meal I can, so let's eat together! And I was thinking it's a good time to introduce you to Dad."

"Oh... R-Right."

I'd been getting nervous, expecting that I'd be going there when her family was absent, but she'd had this in mind instead. While I felt guilty for being a little disappointed, we'd surely have opportunities to be alone together in her room if I went to her house. We might even... Maybe we wouldn't have sex, but at least we could kiss and cuddle when we got a good mood going.

The thought of it made my breathing heavy again.

Runa, however, had a calm smile on her face as she gazed into the distance.

"Maybe I won't feel sad this Christmas if I'm with you," she said.

"Huh...?"

"My whole family used to spend Christmas together back in the day... I always end up remembering it at this time of the year," replied Runa, still smiling.

"Santa would come to our house and give us presents. I was so happy about it."

"Wow..."

Had her family hired a professional Santa? They sure had gone far for the holiday...

Runa giggled. "It was my dad, though. Santa. I half believed it when I was little. My mom would tell me that Santa looks just like the father of the family he visits."

"I see..."

"One year, though, I noticed that Santa wore the same socks that my dad wore. They were the panda socks that me and Maria chose for him when we went to a zoo with our mom. Even the parts on the socks that had faded in the wash were the same."

"He screwed up there, I guess," I commented.

"Yeah... Still, I was a little happy when I found out Santa was my dad," said Runa with a smile before she put on a distant gaze again.

The Sunday evening train was moderately full of people returning from holiday resorts. In contrast with the scenery outside, which was growing darker by the hour, the mood in the car was cheerful.

“I loved my dad back then... Not that I hate him now, I mean.”

I could infer the complicated emotions she felt, considering her circumstances. Her beloved dad had betrayed her mom and cheated on her. That had ripped her family apart. It made sense for her to have mixed feelings.

“I wanted to patch things up with Maria by Christmas... That might be difficult, though. Especially now that the cultural festival is over.”

“Do you still plan to push on with the Friendship Project?” I asked hesitantly.

Runa gave me a deep nod. “Sure. I wanna go back to how we used to be with Maria as soon as I can.”

“I see...”

Considering my complicated feelings toward Kurose-san, I couldn't say anything more and hung my head.

Kurose-san—Runa's younger twin and my first love. She'd rejected me back then, and yet here Kurose-san was now, having feelings for me.

If Runa's Friendship Project were to go on, it would mean I'd continue to be in contact with Kurose-san since I was helping with said project.

“Still, though... Heh heh...”

Hearing her giggle, I turned to look at Runa and saw a satisfied smile on her face.

“I'm really happy for Nicole,” she said. “Right about now, they should already be... Right?!”

“Y-Yeah, probably.”

As I recalled Yamana-san and Sekiya-san, my imagination veered in an indecent direction. I came close to dying from jealousy.

“Oh!” I suddenly said, recalling something at that point.

“What's wrong, Ryuto?”

“It’s nothing.”

I’d realized I’d forgotten to pay Sekiya-san for the popcorn. Then again, I could just do it the next time we met, which would probably be the next day.

If he was at the peak of happiness, maybe he’d overlook it even if I never paid him back. With that in mind, I didn’t bother contacting him about it.

However...

The next day—Monday—Yamana-san came to school exactly as the bell that marked the start of classes rang, and anyone could tell that she’d cried her eyes out just by looking at her.

Runa ran to Yamana-san’s seat as soon as it was break time. “What happened, Nicole?! I was worried about you! You didn’t even read my LINE messages!”

With her upper half folded over her desk and her arms sprawled out, Yamana-san weakly opened her mouth. “I got dumped.”

I had been listening in since my desk was nearby. Yamana-san’s reply made me involuntarily jump from my seat.

“What?!” I exclaimed.

“You’re kidding, right?! Why?!” asked Runa, raising her voice as her face visibly changed. She clearly didn’t expect her best friend to have said something like that. “So, like, he was only after your body?! And he’s done with you after doing it just once?!”

As their conversation drew the interest of our classmates, I got closer to Runa to listen, mixing in with her hangers-on.

“No. We didn’t do it,” replied Yamana-san without lifting herself at all. It appeared that she didn’t even have the energy to do that much. “After we split from you at the station, he was like, ‘Let’s keep our distance for a while’...”

“Why?!” exclaimed Runa.

“He said he wanted to focus on his college entrance exams...”

“What about your clothes?! You were drenched!”

“He bought me new ones at the Uniqlo store at the station, so I got changed and went home...”

Runa was dumbfounded for a moment. Her anger had reached new heights in succession over the course of the conversation.

“B-But wait, then it’s not like he dumped you, right?” she pressed. “He just wants to put distance between you two, yeah?”

“Sure... But it’s just like being dumped, really... He said he won’t contact me anymore and won’t reply if I reach out. He also said it’s okay if I forget about him.”

“What...?! How can he say something so selfish?!”

While Runa trembled with rage, Yamana-san was spacing out. Her eyes were red.



“I wonder if I went too far trying to make a move on him and he got angry? Maybe he likes prim and proper girls, so that was a turnoff for him...” said Yamana-san.

“No way...!” replied Runa.

“Maybe him wanting to focus on exams is just an excuse and he simply lost interest in me...”

That must’ve been the conclusion she’d reached after asking herself why this had happened dozens of times the night before, unable to sleep.

“I can’t imagine any other reason...” she added weakly, her eyes vacant.

“I’ve heard what happened, Sekiya-san. Why did you do such a thing to Yamana-san...?”

That same day after classes, I met up with Sekiya-san in the lounge of our cram school and immediately asked him that question.

At first glance, Sekiya-san looked the same as usual. Upon closer inspection, however, there were signs of exhaustion on his face. Perhaps he hadn’t slept either.

“What do you mean ‘why’...? You saw it too, didn’t you? How she was acting yesterday. The only thing on her mind was doing it with me.”

What the hell?! Are you bragging?!

I kept that show of jealousy to myself and spoke calmly instead. “Wasn’t that perfect for you? She’s your girlfriend and all.”

“Normally that’s how it would be, I guess. But you know what my situation’s like right now, don’t you?”

“Well...”

He must’ve been referring to the fact he was a ronin and his college entrance exams were coming up.

“Besides, I can just see how things would go,” he said. “If we did it once, we’d end up heading over to each other’s houses or to love hotels whenever we had time and going at it like rabbits for about three months. And when I finally got back to my senses and restored my humanity, my exams would already be over. And in more ways than one.”

I sighed. Having never taken college entrance exams, I couldn’t relate at all.

“Weren’t you like that too, at first?” he asked. “Wait, you two’ve been going out for a long time now, right?”

“Huh? W-Well...”

His unexpected question sent me into a panic as I still hadn’t had that experience.

“It feels like you guys have calmed down already,” added Sekiya-san. “Like there’s stability to your relationship.”

“Well, uh... We’ve just hit our fifth month together.”

“Huh... And you’ve already calmed down? Isn’t Shirakawa-san your first girlfriend? I was in rabbit mode for about half a year with the girl I first slept with.”

“Well, what can I say...?”

Damn it, I can’t talk my way out of this... But as I thought that...

“Huh... So *that’s* how it is.” Sekiya-san smirked. “How innocent of you. So you’ve got, like, pure love going on and all?”

“N-Not really...”

It *had* ended up like that as a result, but it wasn’t like I had aimed for a chaste relationship.

“Sorry for being a virgin...” I said, hanging my head.

Sekiya-san smiled, though it wasn’t in a mocking way. “I think a pure love is fine too. I wish I could’ve been like that with Yamana, at least until my college entrance exams were over...” he said with a distant look in his eye.

Another question came to my mind. “Why didn’t you ask Yamana-san for

that?”

“There’s no way. Even over these past two weeks, we barely met up or messaged each other. She’s put up with enough already. If this leads to us going on a date and then losing control, that’s not exactly a good outcome. I know we had a dramatic reunion at the cultural festival and we ended up dating again in the spur of the moment, but at the end of the day, it was never gonna work out with my current situation,” he explained.

“B-But if you properly talked to Yamana-san about it, she might understand what you’re going through and wait for you...”

“You want me to ask her to wait for me until March when all my college entrance exams are over? Even though that’s four months?”

“Wouldn’t she wait, though?” I asked. “She’s been in love with you for three years already, even after you broke up...”

“It’s not like I ever asked her to wait, though. It’s completely different when you start dating and *then* make her wait,” Sekiya-san said flatly. Then, he hung his head. “I’ve really noticed something after I graduated high school. Compared to your time there, there’s a lot less going on in life after you graduate. High school is a really special, precious time. You could become a completely different person in four months. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Huh...?”

I recalled how I’d been four months ago. It had just been a month since I’d started dating Runa. I’d never expected the turbulent summer that had been in store for me.

If I went back another four months from there, I’d been just an introverted fan of KEN who hadn’t dared to even dream of dating the Shirakawa-san he so admired.

I had to admit—four months could lead to amazing changes.

“I couldn’t tie her to myself for four precious months when I couldn’t even do anything for her. I’d feel way too guilty about it. She’s a good girl—I don’t want to take away her right to enjoy her youth freely with someone else.” With that, Sekiya-san heaved a deep sigh. The look on his face suggested he was irritated

at something. “I really don’t have any time to spare right now. My schedule’s totally full with my own stuff. It would be too distracting to know that someone was waiting for me to get through that. I don’t think I could bear it. I just got my mock exam results, and the score for my first choice of college was D again...”

So that was the source of his irritation. He must’ve been aiming for a place he couldn’t get into even with how much he studied.

Then, it occurred to me to ask...

“Wait, so which college are you aiming for?”

Sekiya-san gave me a sour look. “I’d be fine with any, really. As long as I can get into medicine.”

What?

“Medicine?! You want to become a doctor?!” I asked in astonishment.

Sekiya-san gave me a look of amazement. “You really don’t give two shits about me, do you...? I’ve always got medical textbooks, you know.”

That didn’t ring any bells. Apparently, I really didn’t notice things around me.

“Medical school, though...” I said.

I assumed that people with their sights set on that went to specialized cram schools, but there *was* a medical course here at Cram School K, so I supposed it wasn’t so strange that someone like that was here.

“It’s not a goal you can reach just by studying for a year to make up for playing around for three years in high school,” he said. “Still, I can’t cause any more trouble for my parents than I already have... I want to get into college next year, no matter what.”

“And that’s why there’s no choice other than to distance yourself from Yamana-san?” I asked, feeling dreary.

Sekiya-san gave me a small nod. “It was the only way with how we are now.”

After a period of silence, he started scratching his head as if in desperation.

“Man, what’s *up* with her? Why’s she so set on having sex with me, even though she’s a virgin? Do you have any idea how many times I had to bend forward and cover up yesterday? There’s just no way... I couldn’t hold myself back if I let that go on...” he complained.

At that point, a trace of sympathy for him finally appeared in me. His troubles went in a completely different direction from mine, but I was sure this situation was hard to bear for him.

“Well, that’s because she loves you...” I said in consolation.

Somehow, however, it made something else occur to me. Runa’s voice played in my head.

“Love you, Ryuto!”

Runa often said those words. I’d never doubted them, and I *did* believe they came from the heart.

Still... I’d never once felt the sort of sexy aura that Yamana-san had given off yesterday from Runa. With that in mind, I couldn’t help but see Runa’s love for me as something still developing. It was only natural that she didn’t ask me for sex.

“Haah...”

“Haah...”

I sighed from the bottom of my heart, and it happened to overlap with Sekiya-san’s own.

“Why’re *you* feeling down?” he asked, smiling as our eyes met. He seemed to find the situation funny. “Anyway, I’m going to the study room. It’s gonna be too late for me if I don’t score a B on the next mock exam,” he said with a joking air and got up.

Seeing that, I suddenly recalled something and called out to him. “Ah, Sekiya-san!”

As I handed him several coins from my pocket, he frowned and looked down at his palm.

“What’s this? Charity?”

“It’s for yesterday’s popcorn.”

At that, Sekiya-san relaxed his expression. “Oh... You’ve got some strong principles, huh.” He stuck the hand with coins into his jacket pocket. “Thanks. Guess I’ll buy an oden or something with this to warm myself up.”

As he said that and left, he somehow looked smaller than usual.

Two weeks passed, and December came.

During long homeroom one day as the class was on edge about the approaching end-of-term tests, the topic of “Group Distribution for the School Trip” was brought up.

We second-years were to go on a trip in March. Since it was at least nominally a school trip, we were now going to use a period for integrated studies to decide what each group would do during their free time on the trip. We would also look into the history and culture of the place we were visiting.

“Each group should have five to seven people, and make sure there are both boys and girls. Now, please form your groups,” said the class representative.

Our classmates got up from their seats and started moving about, forming groups.

“Ryuto!”

Runa called out to me and I headed her way. Yamana-san and Tanikita-san were already next to her.

“Wanna group up?” she asked.

“Sure,” I replied. We’d been planning to do that since before today.

“What about Ijichi-kun? Is he absent today?” Runa asked.

“Y-Yeah...” I replied while looking at Tanikita-san.

After the cultural festival, Icchi had been in poor health. He often stayed home instead of going to school. When he did come to school, he often spaced out, and during lunchtime, he didn’t eat even half of his lunch box. The rejection he’d suffered at the hands of Tanikita-san seemed to have a rather

lingering effect.

“Well, we have Kashima-kun, so we might as well put him in our group too, just in case,” said Tanikita-san.

“Yeah. If he wants to join a different one, he can say so when he comes to school,” replied Runa.

As I looked at Tanikita-san, I didn’t really see any indication of her being racked by guilt. Had it been me, I probably would’ve found it hard to bear. She really didn’t let things linger.

“Maria!” Runa suddenly called out, making me put myself on guard. “Join our group!”

Looking over at them, I saw Runa press Kurose-san while the latter looked somewhat confused.

“S-Sure...” Kurose-san replied, nodding with a stiff expression. She’d been standing flustered all by herself, and it didn’t look like there were any other groups she’d planned on joining.

“Hooray! That’s settled, then!” exclaimed Runa in an overly loud voice, pulling Kurose-san along by the hand. I figured she was nervous in her own way, and she was being energetic to hide that. “Okay, our group is the people here plus Ijichi-kun, and that’s everyone, right?”

We nodded.

“If Nishina-kun was here, it would’ve been the whole airsoft group...” said Tanikita-san.

“Well, he’s in a different class, so what can you do?” I replied.

I considered Nisshi’s situation. Picking a group would surely be hell for him... He didn’t have any friends in his class, which was why he kept coming to ours during every break.

That said, I didn’t exactly have enough concern to spare for others, considering my own circumstances. Kurose-san would smile at me when our eyes met every now and then. Unable to say anything to her, I would give a vague smile in return.

“Now then, split up into your groups and get to work,” said the class representative, at which point each group pulled some desks together and sat down. “Decide on your group’s leader and deputy.”

As soon as she heard this, Runa raised a hand. “I’ll be the leader!” She then looked over to Kurose-san sitting next to her. “You’ll be my deputy, right, Maria?!”

“Huh...?!” After that, Kurose-san went speechless in confusion.

This must’ve been part of Runa’s Friendship Project. She probably wanted to shrink the distance between them by being leader and deputy together.

Gazing at Kurose-san, I figured I had to help Runa.

“You have a good sense of responsibility...so I think you’re fit to be the deputy,” I said. “When we were on class duty together...you were efficient and it helped.”

Kurose-san blushed a little. “Okay... I’ll do it, then.”

When a leader and a deputy had been decided for every group, the class representative spoke again. “Leaders and deputies, please gather in front! I’ll explain how to make the study notes you’ll need to prepare before the start of the school trip!”

“Oh, she’s calling us up! Let’s go, Maria!” said Runa.

“Huh? O-Okay...” A little confused from start to finish, Kurose-san was swept up in Runa’s pace and taken to the front of the classroom.

The only ones left at the desks were me, Yamana-san, and Tanikita-san.

Yamana-san sighed deeply. “A school trip, huh.”

Tanikita-san looked over to her. “Have you talked to your senpai since then, Nikki?”

“Nope. How could I? I don’t want him to hate me any more than he already does.”

“Ah, I guess he’s busy with studying.”

I felt kinda guilty toward Yamana-san since I saw Sekiya-san at cram school

pretty much every day. Unlike Icchi, who still hadn't gotten over his broken heart at all, Yamana-san seemed to have recovered a fair bit.

"Maybe he wasn't satisfied with me after all... Senpai apparently was pretty popular after getting into high school. He must've dated a lot of pretty girls... He was natural at taking the lead at our date. I was actually really surprised since he was so used to girls compared to how he'd been back then," said Yamana-san, sighing every now and then.

Tanikita-san's face lit up. "It must be nice to have an experienced boyfriend! If I'm gonna date someone, I really want him to be used to girls."

"Huh? Really?"

"He'd totally make our dates great! I want my boyfriend to take the lead in all sorts of things."

"Ehh, I dunno," said Yamana-san. "I'd be worried he's a playboy. Wouldn't you feel safer if he wasn't used to that stuff?"

Sitting at the desk between them and getting caught up in what was completely *girl talk*, I couldn't really pretend not to be listening—that would've been unnatural. The best I could do was listen closely while making as respectable a face as I could.

"I would've been fine if senpai was still a virgin," said Yamana-san, sulking a little.

"Nikki, that's because you've been in love with him since middle school!" immediately retorted Tanikita-san. "Pretty much any guy in his second year of high school with at least somewhat good looks either has a girlfriend or has had one before. Who likes guys with no experience?"

As a guy with no experience, that almost hurt to hear, but I reassured myself with the fact that I had a girlfriend.

"If he's a virgin, that means other girls didn't even look at him," continued Tanikita-san. "It's not like guys have any reason to protect their chastity. That's why I don't like virgins."

It felt like a massive spear had been lodged into my chest. It had come too

suddenly and I couldn't avoid it.

"Ngh..." I let out involuntarily. *It's okay, it's okay...*

I had Runa. Runa liked and even dated a virgin such as myself, and eventually...in the not-so-distant future, I was supposed to have my first loving experience.

I figured Yamana-san knew the details of our relationship from Runa. It felt like she was looking at me with pity—perhaps she'd realized how I felt as I sat in silence.

"It's true that girls' desires are pretty social. It's like we only want things that other people already have or want for themselves," said Yamana-san.

Tanikita-san nodded deeply. "Exactly. Like how anything that the person you admire owns starts to look good to you. That's why brand-name bags and accessories that celebrities have get popular, right?"

"It's the same with nails. Many girls get an interest in doing them after seeing their friends' flashy nails," said Yamana-san, looking at her own showily decorated ones. "Girls eat the same foods and own the same things as their friends and tell each other 'that stuff's nice' or 'that was kinda meh.' We take pleasure in identifying with each other." At that point, Yamana-san turned to look at me, who'd tried to assimilate with the air until now. "Guys, on the other hand, are like lone wolves on that front. It's that frontier spirit, isn't it? The stuff that makes you go on journeys and seek unexplored lands. You have a strong desire to see things that nobody's seen before, right?"

"W-Well... I *am* drawn to that, I guess," I replied.

"You want things that are yours alone or things only you know. It's important to guys to feel special or superior like that, right?"

"Y-Yeah, that's normal..."

I'd thought it was a natural human desire that anyone possessed, but maybe it wasn't all that important to many girls? This was a fresh discovery for me.

"I don't like lumping people together that way, like 'because they're guys' or 'because they're girls,' but what can you do when they are, in fact, different?"

Even if there *are* exceptions, of course,” Yamana-san explained.

I sighed. While her words *had* actually impressed me, there was a question on my mind.

“Y-You haven’t dated anyone other than Sekiya-san either, right? How are you so knowledgeable about love?”

At that, she started playing with her hair. “Hmm... Well, you know how it’s in character for me to take care of people younger than me? Ever since middle school, I’ve had friends and juniors consult me on matters of the heart real often.”

I *had* somehow taken her for a girl with a lot of experience in love before I’d learned the truth.

“At first I only gave half-hearted replies, but as people kept telling me their own love stories, I gradually realized the differences in how guys and girls feel love and what they desire.”

But despite all the understanding of the male desire that she had, her attempts at seducing Sekiya-san had led to him distancing himself from her. Talk about drowning in her own schemes.

“In that sense, it’s *you* who should be careful from now on, Kashima Ryuto.”

Yamana-san’s sudden callout caught me off guard and shook me up.

“There’s a lotta girls who look up to Runa. You know how even famous and beautiful actresses’ husbands cheat on them and it becomes a scandal? The women they cheat with have that same mentality of wanting the same brand-name bag as the celebrity they look up to.”

“What’s up with that...?”

“Guys with attractive girlfriends become more popular than they’d be by themselves.”

So, what, guys are brand-name bags now...? I’m starting to think women are terrifying.

“I think you’re right, though,” added Tanikita-san. “Sometimes a guy who’s not even your type starts to look fifty percent more handsome because if *she*

chose him, then he must be great.”

“Exactly. That’s the dangerous part,” replied Yamana-san, bending forward. “You better be careful,” she told me with a sharp look.

It made me flinch. “Huh? R-Right...”

“If a girl approaches you in the future, you better keep in mind that she’s not focused on you personally, but on Runa.”

“Ehh, but what if she’s just really into guys like Kashima-kun?” asked Tanikita-san.

Yamana-san folded her arms. “That may be possible if she doesn’t know Runa at all. Like, if she hasn’t even seen pictures of her and doesn’t know that she exists.”

“I guess that rules out everyone from our school... Anyone would think of Runy when they see Kashima-kun.”

“Yeah, like, ‘That’s *Shirakawa Runa*’s boyfriend.’”

I went silent at that. It seemed that Runa had even more charisma with girls than I’d realized.

“What’s wrong? Is there someone already making a move on you?” Yamana-san asked as she lightly glared at me, bringing me back to my senses with a start.

“N-No, not really...”

At that point, Kurose-san came back. She put the pile of printouts she’d been holding against her chest down on the desk with a thud.

One of them fell to the floor. I reached out to pick it up, and my hand ended up on top of someone else’s as they’d reached out for it at almost the same time.

“Oh, sorry,” I said.

Looking up in a fluster, I found Kurose-san’s blushing face before me.

“It’s okay, I’m the one who should apologize,” she replied. Kurose-san returned the printout to the desk and gently rubbed the back of her hand

where it had touched mine.

“Have you all seen the printouts?” asked Runa, having just returned herself.

“Not yet. Kurose-san only just brought them,” replied Tanikita-san. She picked up a printout for herself—there seemed to be just enough for all of us in the group. “Wow, this is such a pain! We gotta research all this stuff and fill it out?!”

“Wouldn’t ‘The trip was fun!’ cut it?”

As Tanikita-san and Yamana-san voiced their complaints, Kurose-san handed the printouts out to the other group members in a detached manner.

“Thanks, Maria!” Runa said cheerfully upon receiving hers, already sitting in her chair.

“By the way, Runy, when did you and Kurose-san get so friendly?” asked Tanikita-san, finding it strange to see them like that. “When Takei-sensei came to help with decorations at the cultural festival and complained how things were a mess with the pamphlet subcommittee, I was worried things might not be going so well over there.”

Her words made Runa and Kurose-san freeze up for a moment. While they were both conscious of each other, they didn’t make eye contact, and both had rather awkward smiles on their faces.

“Nah, we didn’t have a problem like that. We made the pamphlets without any issues either! Right, Ryuto?” asked Runa.

“Y-Yeah...” I replied.

Runa’s honest side revealed itself in her statement of “not having a problem like that.”

“Really...? Okay, then.”

Even though she had said that, Tanikita-san seemed to have of course picked up on the strange air between Runa and Kurose-san. It didn’t feel like she was satisfied with the way the topic had ended.

I figured Yamana-san knew about the real relationship between Runa and Kurose-san and she’d remained silent all along. I was somewhat uncomfortable

with her gaze—maybe it was due to the previous topic. I didn't look at Kurose-san again after that.

That day after school, I was having a snack in the cram school lounge with Sekiya-san, as usual.

After we were done eating, he gave me a dubious look. "So, what is it today? You know I'm dying here from all the recent events, right?" he asked.

"Huh...?"

"There's something you want to talk about, yeah? You've been spacing out for a while now. And you're sitting there to buy time instead of throwing out your trash after you finished eating."

"Oh..."

So he'd noticed.

I hadn't formed the topic properly yet, not even in my head, so I'd been wondering if it was okay to ask him about it.

"Um, it's about Kurose-san."

"It's her again, huh," he replied in amazement, leaning on the back of his chair. "So, what about her?"

"We're going on a school trip and she's in our group."

"And?"

"I'm just wondering what I should do."

A huge frown appeared on Sekiya-san's face. "What?"

Yeah... I know, all right? I'd have the same reaction if someone brought up a topic like that with me.

"Is there a problem with that?" he asked.

"No... It's just a problem of my feelings."

"Feelings, eh."

"Kurose-san is a nice girl too," I said.

“What, you wanna switch over to her?”

“No! I wasn’t thinking that at all.”

“Then what is it? Do you wanna lose your V-card to Kurose-san before having sex with your girlfriend?”

“O-Of course not!”

He was saying all these extreme things so indifferently. I ended up imagining what he’d said in spite of myself, and my face grew hot.

“I just can’t help seeing Kurose-san as a girl...” I said. “When our hands end up touching, my heart starts beating fast... I was thinking it might mean I’m being unfaithful to Runa.”

Sekiya-san hadn’t even been trying to hide the look of amazement on his face for a while now.

“Dude... Are you a virgin? Well, I guess you are, huh. Sorry.”

While I had half a mind to lash out because of how he started and ended that himself, I hung my head instead. I couldn’t even talk back.

“Well, what can you do? You’re a guy. Just consider yourself lucky if your hands touch.”

“Even if I know she has a crush on me?” I asked.

“What’s so bad about that? It’s great. You can avoid the annoying parts of going out with somebody and instead just enjoy the racing pulse you get early in a relationship. Anyone born as a guy wants to be popular, no?”

“B-But I don’t want to break up with Runa,” I countered. “I’ll kinda feel bad for Kurose-san if we keep getting along...”

“How’s that *your* problem?”

“But...”

Kurose-san was Runa’s sister, after all...

Sekiya-san folded his arms. “Well, you *are* the earnest type, I guess...” Suddenly, he made a face like emptiness had just come over him. “And actually, are you sure you should even be talking to me about this with the way I am

now?”

“Huh?”

“Or what, are you the kinda guy who’d ask an Indian person if you should have some steak or sukiyaki?”

“What’s that supposed to mean...?”

If most Indians are followers of Hinduism... Was he saying that talking about beef to someone who couldn’t eat it was the same as talking about love to Sekiya-san—someone who was avoiding contact with his girlfriend?

It was way too obtuse. Still, saying things that way felt like something he’d do.

“Look, as long as you’re heterosexual, all friends of the opposite sex will be ‘more than friends but less than lovers’ to you,” he said.

Faced with a wild argument like that, I fell deep into thought.

“B-But still,” I replied. “There are girls who can talk to guys while being relatively unconcerned that they’re members of the opposite sex.”

Yamana-san and Tanikita-san came to mind. It wasn’t like we were close, and to other people, it might look like I acted suspiciously when talking to them, but from my perspective, I could talk to them fairly normally.

“That’s because those girls have no romantic interest in you whatsoever—not that I can say for sure. But just try imagining them talking to you while being as affectionate as possible.”

“Huh...?”

Perplexed, I nonetheless did as I had been told. I tried imagining Yamana-san being like that. Even from an outsider’s perspective, she’d looked cute when she’d gazed at Sekiya-san with those eyes filled with love.

What if that had been directed at me...?

“It’s not bad, is it?” asked Sekiya-san.

“W-Well...”

It was awkward to have had those thoughts about Yamana-san in front of Sekiya-san of all people, so I couldn’t say much. I simply nodded.

“That’s how it is. A guy’s not gonna have female friends who don’t raise his pulse at all. It’s not like you’re gonna cheat, so isn’t it okay to simply talk to a girl who likes you? I get that it might be too hard for you to enjoy letting your heart race from it while also feeling guilty pleasure from the fact she’s your girlfriend’s sister, but it’s not like you’re doing anything bad. Why not just keep things normal?”

Normal... What the hell is normal, anyway?

“S-Still. Shouldn’t I tell Runa, at the very least?”

“You an idiot or something? What’re you gonna tell your girlfriend? ‘My heart races when I talk to your sister?’ Put yourself in her shoes when she hears that. There are some things people are better off not knowing. Being faithful doesn’t mean sharing every single thing with your girlfriend.”

Sekiya-san’s argument felt as sound as they came. I was at a loss for words.

“You’re never gonna be able to date anyone but her if you say stuff like that,” he then added. “Even if you have a girlfriend, what’s wrong with simply talking to cute girls? Just let your heart race and feel lucky—it’s up to you. You should value your own world. Are you okay with the idea of not having any female friends your whole life?”

“That’s...”

Not good, I think.

But why?

“All right, enough of this! Let’s go to the study room,” said Sekiya-san, as if in desperation. “What the hell, man? This was all about you showing off how popular you are!” He then got up from his seat and started cleaning up the table.

I did the same, despite being not quite satisfied with where our conversation had ended up.

“Anyway, did you decide what college you wanna go to?” he asked on our way to the study room.

“Huh?” I replied, confused. “I’m still in my second year of high school, you

know.”

“Some already make a choice by then. Don’t you find it strange to be studying for college entrance exams when you don’t have your sights set on any college at all yet? Where’re you gonna get your motivation?”

He had a point... I *did* want to work as hard as I could, but without a set goal, I couldn’t deny that it felt like I was kinda fumbling around.

“Of course, it’s important to study, but you should consider what colleges you wanna aim for, even if it takes up a bit of your study time,” he said. “Otherwise, you’re gonna hit a dead end.”

I sighed. What gave me a bit of a fright was the fact that, just as he’d said, I’d already been feeling like I’d hit a wall in my studies.

Runa had more experiences in life than me and was much more mature than I was, despite being the same age. I’d started studying for college entrance exams because I wanted to catch up to her as quickly as I could.

And yet...it didn’t feel like I was closing the distance between us at all. I wanted to become an adult as soon as I could, but it wasn’t working.

I was still a virgin, and even in studying for college entrance exams, I currently couldn’t tell how much closer I’d come to my goal. It made sense, since I hadn’t set a goal.

Perhaps it was this impatience that sometimes made me feel like my motivation was getting me nowhere, even though I went to the study room practically every day. It brought my mood down.

It felt like Sekiya-san had picked up on what was going on inside my mind, and that embarrassed me.

“I’ll give it some thought...” I replied for the time being, following him into the study room.

Chapter 1.5: Kurose Maria's Diary

There's a question that's been coming to mind as of late: where does my happiness lie?

If Kashima-kun were to become mine, even for just a moment...what would become of me after that?

I know better than anyone that a future where he casts Runa aside and instead chooses me will never come. Even if Runa herself stepped out of the way, she'd remain in his heart forever.

Because she's a muse. The heroine of the story is always Runa.

She's honest, cheerful, can get along with anyone quickly, always faces forward, doesn't mope around, and has many friends...

Deep inside, I've always looked up to Runa. From the bottom of my heart. I wanted to become her. We're twins, and yet I'm completely different from her.

Even if I might've been her, had something gone ever so slightly differently in our mother's stomach.

With that in mind, I started acting like Runa. When I did that, at some point, people began saying I was just playing cute and innocent.

I'm sure that Runa isn't good at imitating my voice. I have no doubt that she's never wanted to become me.

Only I've done that. I've just always been so conscious of her. Even when I'm not near her.

When I wanted someone to like me, I always thought of Runa—what would she do?

But when I reunited with her in high school, I made a mistake. I did something she would never do: I tried to bring someone down through schemes, all because I was jealous of her. My true colors quickly came to light, and now I'm living as my real self.

I've always been wandering around a labyrinth with no exit. My happy ending is nowhere in sight. But even so, I have no choice but to continue on this path. After all, it was my own actions that led me to this labyrinth in the first place.

In truth, though, I want someone to save me...

Someone, get me out of here...

Kashima-kun, please help me. Guide me with your light...

Chapter 2

When students broke into groups to work on things during a period for integrated studies, Icchi showed up to school for the first time in a while.

“Huh...? Is that...?”

“Ijichi-kun...?”

A small commotion spread through the class.

And no wonder—Icchi had lost a *lot* of weight.

His cheeks had buried his eyes in the past, but now that he was much leaner, you could see his eyes clearly. The whole “thin eyes with single-edged eyelids” impression he’d given off before was gone. His waistline looked trim in his uniform as well, and there was a lot of excess fabric hanging now.

Basically, he’d become a tall, rather well-built high schooler with a normal figure.

“Icchi... What happened?!” I finally managed to ask him when we started to pull our desks together for group activities. It had been difficult to approach him earlier due to the air he was giving off, which indicated to me that something was going on with him.

“Heh heh heh...” he laughed fearlessly, radiating a suspicious aura. “So you’ve noticed, Kasshi? I’ve finally become an active Kid.”

“Whaaat?!”

“You gotta be kidding, Icchi!” At some point, Nisshi had made his way next to us. There was astonishment in his voice too.

Active Kids were KEN Kids who could play games with KEN in his videos. Icchi and Nisshi had always worked on their gaming skill in order to reach one of those spots, but there were tons of people like that all over Japan, so it was a dream that seldom came true.

“Icchi, weren’t you feeling down after Tanikita-san rejected you...?” asked

Nisshi, flustered.

Ichhi smiled fearlessly again. “That I was... But it was more than simply feeling down. I channeled that sadness and anger into gaming... Before I knew it, I’d been building stuff in game for days—weeks—without eating or drinking.”

“Okay, ‘weeks’ is *definitely* a lie.”

“You’d be dead.”

He continued, ignoring us. “And so, when a test was held for those in KEN’s six-hundred-person *Yourcraft* server the other day and I built something on the level of a World Heritage in thirty minutes, KEN DM’d me, saying I was in.”

“What?!”

“W-Wait, you mean that new builder Kid he introduced on his stream yesterday...”

“That’s right. That ‘Gloomy Yusuke’ is my nickname.”

If you didn’t know what we were talking about, this would all probably fly right past your head. Basically, Ichhi was devoting himself to building stuff in a construction game called *Yourcraft*, which had you use digital Lego blocks.

Ichhi had been good at math from the start and was really strong at science, so it wasn’t strange for him to have more skill at building stuff than the average person. It seemed that Tanikita-san’s rejection had pushed him into gaming in an extremely detached state, and it appeared to have developed a hidden talent in him.

“Holy crap, man!” exclaimed Nisshi, holding his head. He seemed to be shocked by the fact that Ichhi had stolen a march on him.

As I looked at Nisshi, something occurred to me. “Wait, why are you in our class, Nisshi? We’re in an integrated studies period right now...” I asked.

“It’s integrated studies in my class too!” exclaimed Nisshi, looking ready to cry. “Help me, man! We have thirty-three people in our class and we had to split into groups for the school trip! Before I knew it, there were four groups of seven and I had no choice other than to join a group of four, but that group has two guys and two girls, and guess what—that’s *two couples* we’re talking

about! They're all lovey-dovey with each other and it's like they're on a double date while I'm there all by myself! I wanna diiiiie!"

"Wow..."

His unimaginably harsh situation made me assume the face of a character from a *Kosuke Masuda Theater* manga.

"I'm not gonna get in your way, so at least let me stay under your desks or something... Please..." he whined.

"O-Okay," I replied.

Fortunately, from now until the school trip, the integrated studies periods had a high degree of freedom and students were allowed to go to the library and back during class. Teachers were often absent too, so I figured we might be able to come up with some excuse for Nisshi being here.

Incidentally, the girls in our group were off at the library to get materials at the moment.

"By the way, is it still the same with Yamana-san?" Nisshi suddenly asked, looking around himself.

He was probably asking if Sekiya-san was still keeping his distance from her.

"Yeah, still the same," I replied.

"I see. Huh..."

He acted indifferently, but his eyes wandered all over the place. It seemed his unrequited love was still ongoing.

If I had to choose, I was on Sekiya-san's side, so I couldn't proactively support Nisshi, but I did want to warmly watch over him as his friend.

"I'm back!" announced Runa, standing at the front of the group of girls who'd just returned from the library.

"Oh hey, you're Nishina Ren," said Yamana-san.

"What're you doing here?" Runa asked.

"Well..." he said, flustered. He seemed to be shaken up by the fact that Yamana-san called his name.

“Also, Ijichi-kun, were you okay with joining our group?” asked Runa.

At that, Gloomy Yusuke—or should I say Icchi Ver. 2.0—nervously nodded. It looked like he was the same old Yusuke on the inside.

Curious, I looked over to Tanikita-san and saw something I couldn’t overlook.

She was staring fixedly at Icchi. Her cheeks were flushed and her lips were trembling. Then, she shut her eyes as though embarrassment had just washed over her. Tanikita-san lifted the book that’d been in her hand so it was in front of her face, hiding from Icchi.

What the hell is going on here? She rejected him so mercilessly, so what’s up with this reaction...?

It was difficult for Icchi to be surrounded by extroverted girls, so he volunteered to take the materials we no longer needed back to the library. Nisshi joined him. As soon as they left the classroom, I started to get answers to my questions.

Tanikita-san excitedly spoke up to the other girls. “Hey, did you all see Ijichi-kun?”

“Huh? What about him?” replied Runa.

“Oh yeah, he lost a lotta weight. Freaked me out,” added Yamana-san.

While this was going on, Kurose-san read one of the books from the library by herself—she must’ve figured that Tanikita-san wasn’t speaking to her.



“No, but like, isn’t it crazy? He looks way too much like E-Joon.”

I had forgotten who that was, so I looked over to Runa. Once our eyes met, she mouthed to me that he was a member of VTS.

So Icchi looks like a K-pop idol that Tanikita-san’s a fan of, huh.

“It’s seriously crazy. My heart won’t stop pounding. Isn’t Ijichi-kun as tall as E-Joon too? That makes them pretty much the same person!”

“Huh...? A-Are they that similar?” asked Runa.

“Wait, Akari, weren’t you a fan of Jaemi?” added Yamana-san.

Tanikita-san pouted. “Jaemi is for BL fantasies! My real love’s for E-Joon!”

“That so?”

“So why not go out with Ijichi-kun?” suggested Runa.

At that, Tanikita-san made a blank face, like a Haniwa figure. “Wh-What’re you talking about?! How could I?!” she countered. “I brutally shut him down when he confessed to me at the cultural festival! It was bad enough that he didn’t come to school for a month!”

So she *was* aware...and she’d still reacted the way she had. She really did have a strong heart.

“And to make things worse, I told him I didn’t know him well and asked if he wanted me to like him because of his face. And here I am, liking him for his face! How pathetic! It’s pathetic and shameless! There’s no way I could do that—I’d rather die!” Covering her face, Tanikita-san thrashed about, kicking her legs.

Out of curiosity, I looked for a picture of E-Joon on my phone under the desk. Sure, his face did resemble Icchi’s the way it was now, but his hairstyle and hair color were different in each photo. He was wearing makeup too. So, frankly, I couldn’t really tell one way or another.

Well, if a fan was saying the two of them looked a lot like each other, I figured they must.

“So there’s absolutely no way! You better not tell him!” exclaimed Tanikita-

san.

“Oh, but it’s such a waste!” Runa said. “Ijichi-kun might still like you, so maybe you have a chance at going out with him if you say something.”

“And he lost so much weight because of the shock of your rejection, right? He definitely hasn’t put it behind him,” added Yamana-san.

However, Tanikita-san stubbornly shook her head. “No. Absolutely not. Confessing after what I said? Never.” Then, she looked over at me. “You better not tell Ijichi-kun either. If you do, you’re dead.”

I hadn’t done anything, but her threat and the scary look on her face made me tremble in fear.

“O-Of course...!” I replied.

Icchi was ecstatic now that he’d become an active Kid anyway, so I figured I had no choice but to leave these two alone for now.

There was one thing I simply *had* to ask, however.

“Um... Tanikita-san?”

“Mm?” She seemed to find it strange that I’d speak up to her, which was indeed unusual.

“You realize Icchi is a virgin, right?” I asked.

A large frown appeared on her face. “So what?”

“Huh?”

After everything she said to Yamana-san the other day...?

Tanikita-san went on, her face still stern. “Kashima-kun, let me tell you how to attract a girl who’s got no regard for logic whatsoever.” As I held my breath from the unusual determination in her voice, she continued. “You have to be overwhelmingly her type in terms of looks. If you can do that, everything else is secondary.”

Well, that sure was blunt. It’s downright refreshing to get an answer like that.

I sat there, dumbfounded, and with Tanikita-san boldly gazing back at me, I couldn’t find anything to say back to her.

The integrated studies periods went on the same way the following week, and Nisshi slipped into our class again for today's too.

These were practically self-study classes. Anything went—even sleeping or skipping them entirely was okay. Icchi, who'd apparently received homework from KEN to build something new, fell asleep immediately as soon as we pulled our desks together as if he weren't getting enough sleep night after night. I accidentally did so as well since I often stayed up late at night studying for tests both here and at my cram school.

When I woke up all of a sudden, roughly thirty minutes had passed since the start of the period. Runa wasn't around, and Kurose-san and Tanikita-san were nowhere to be seen either. They must've gone to the library together.

The only ones in our group still present were Yamana-san, Nisshi, and a sound-asleep Icchi. Nisshi sat in Tanikita-san's seat, facing Yamana-san across the table. He wasn't doing anything. It seemed that they'd just finished talking about something and now had nothing to do as they sat in silence.

However, they'd yet to notice that I'd woken up. Somehow it felt like it was better off that way, so I turned my face toward the desk again and only directed my eyes toward the two of them.

"B-By the way," began Nisshi.

Nisshi's starting a conversation...?

Out of the three of us, he seemed like he'd be the one most negatively affected by puberty. But here he was, starting a conversation with a girl. I was secretly impressed.

"You know how we have the same 'na' kanji in our surnames?" he said.

For a moment I was internally like, "What?" But then, I considered their surnames—Nishina and Yamana... Now that he mentioned it, it was true. I'd never noticed it at all until now.

"I guess so," replied Yamana-san, listlessly resting her chin in her hand. It wasn't like she was in a bad mood because of Nisshi—she was always like this in

class. "What about it?"

Nisshi got a little flustered at that reply. "Oh, nothing in particular... I just thought there might be something."

"Such as?"

"Well, you know... Something..." Not being very coherent, Nisshi made a strenuous effort to force his voice out. "...fateful?"

He went and said it...

Wouldn't this make Yamana-san notice how he felt? With that in mind, I held my breath.

Yamana-san then spoke up without removing her chin from her hand. "Are you coming on to me? You've got a long way to go before you can pull that off."

An answer like that would've made me lose heart, but Nisshi wasn't discouraged.

"Maybe, but still..." he said, as though refusing to back down. He gazed back at Yamana-san. "If you don't do anything, you'll never get anything done, you know?"

Inside my head, two guys in polo shirts started dancing and singing "Atarimae Taiso" like in a comedy sketch, but something seemed to have resonated with Yamana-san. A faint blush had appeared on her cheeks.

"I have a boyfriend," she said bluntly.

"I know," replied Nisshi sullenly. "You can't get in touch with him, though, right? Not until his college entrance exams are over."

Lifting her chin from her hand, Yamana-san looked at Nisshi with a serious expression on her face. "So, what? You're saying you wanna be his replacement?"

Nisshi nervously nodded a few times. "I-I'll do my best."

Yamana-san gave him a dubious look. "Let me make this clear: it *definitely* won't work."

"You can't know that!" exclaimed Nisshi, seeming to get worked up. But then,

he looked toward the classroom door and suddenly dived under the desks.

Runa, Kurose-san, and Tanikita-san had shown up. Nisshi must've hidden on reflex because he'd thought the teacher had returned.

"We're back!" announced Runa.

"Hey Runa, these guys aren't waking up at all. Want me to smack them and wake them up?" Yamana-san suggested. "They haven't done anything at all today."

By "these guys," she must've meant me and Icchi. I opened my eyes at once, but then I thought better of it and closed them again, still pretending to be asleep. I didn't want them to realize I'd been awake for some time and had overheard Nisshi and Yamana-san's conversation.

"It's okay. I'm sure they're tired," said Runa with a smile. I could hear the sound of her sitting down. "Ryuto seems to be busy studying recently. I don't think he gets much sleep. I'll do his part."

Runa's voice, full of thoughtfulness, went straight to my heart.

"And I'll do Ijichi-kun's part!" added Tanikita-san in high spirits. "Also, even his sleeping face looks like E-Joon's! I want a picture! The teacher's not here yet, right? You think it's okay to take my phone out?"

"Aha ha, no secret pictures, Akari," said Runa.

"Wait, how do you even know what an idol's sleeping face looks like?" asked Yamana-san.

"The other members upload backstage videos often," replied Tanikita-san.

Well, they sure are enjoying their youth, I thought. Everyone had feelings for someone. Even if those feelings weren't reciprocated.

As that went through my head, I slightly opened my eyes. However, I was surprised at whose eyes I saw first, so I closed mine again. For a while, the image of Kurose-san gazing at me with a calm smile was burnt into my retinas.

One day, after studying for tests at cram school, I was walking to the station.

The road was already completely dark.

Someone called out to me from behind.

“Kashima-kun.”

My heart skipped a beat—because even before I turned around, I already knew who it was.

“Kurose-san...” I said. “Did your classes just end?”

Kurose-san came up beside me and looked at me with a smile. “No, I was in the study room. I was studying there for tests, but it was getting late.”

“Ah, same. Those tests are coming up next week.”

“Yeah. I also want to watch Kino’s new videos. My backlog keeps piling up...”

“Speaking of videos, I watched one of your recommendations the other day...”

“Oh, really?!”

Thus, we began talking about gaming videos and got lost in our conversation on our way back from cram school.

“By the way, the other day, I watched KEN’s Mafia videos for the first time in a while, since you mentioned them,” said Kurose-san.

“Oh? What did you think?”

“They were fun! There may be some people out there who are better at Mafia than KEN, but it would be really hard to find someone who made videos of it that are more fun than his.”

“For real?”

When Kurose-san, a serious fan of Mafia, said something like that, it made me happy—as though I were the one receiving praise.

“You should check out his *Yourcraft* videos too, then, if you like,” I suggested.

“Ah, the ones with Ijichi-kun? I heard you talking about it the other day.”

“That’s right. I think it’ll be easier for you to get into them if you start from the episode where new people join in.”

"I guess so," she said. "Okay, tell me what they're called."

"Right... Give me a sec, I'll look them up. Wow, it's that far back in the list? KEN, why do you upload so much?"

Chatting about this and that, we got to Station K before we knew it.

"Kurose-san, are you riding your bike home today?" I asked at the roundabout in front of the station.

Her eyes wandered a bit and she shook her head. "No, I'm walking."

"I see..."

I hesitated because I recalled what had happened when I'd walked her home the other day. By coincidence, Runa had been waiting in front of her place and I'd run into her there, which had made her suspicious of me.

However, it was already ten in the evening. Kurose-san might have been only a friend, but I felt like, as a guy, I couldn't just let a girl walk home alone.

After a moment of worrying, the conclusion I came to was...

"I can get home going down this street too," I said. "Let me walk you to the convenience store past the turn on this main street."

Taking that route would let me walk her home partway while having the honorable excuse of "having simply run into a classmate on the way home and walking part of the way together."

Kurose-san looked a bit sad, but then, with rosy cheeks, she said, "Okay, thank you." After we started walking, she spoke up again. "I'm sorry about last time. Runa got angry at you after that, right?"

She must've been talking about the time we'd run into her sister.

"Yeah... I mean, no, she didn't get *angry*."

"Really?" Kurose-san looked surprised at that. "It's not often Runa gets mad at friends or the like, but at times when she did and I saw it, she was *really* scary. I thought even you might've seen that side of her."

"Huh? W-Well... I guess I haven't."

Runa getting mad...? I'd seen her sulk in a coy way, get jealous, and be more

open with her emotions than usual a few times, but I couldn't even imagine her being openly angry with someone.

"Maybe there really is a difference between a boyfriend and a sister..." uttered Kurose-san, narrowing her eyes as though reminiscing about the past. "We were the best of friends and the biggest rivals. Or at the very least, I thought of us that way."

"When did Shirakawa-san get angry?" I asked.

Kurose-san looked off into the distance. "I think Runa was the maddest that time with Chi-chan." A small smile appeared on her face. "Chi-chan was a cat-shaped stuffed animal. When we were little and I went to our aunt's place to play, I found her—the toy, that is—at a shopping mall. Our aunt bought her for me."

We walked side by side on the wide sidewalk along a main street. Kurose-san continued speaking as she gazed at our feet, lit up by the streetlights.

"I didn't have much interest in toys, though. I left the stuffed animal sitting around after I brought her home and Runa asked to have her. I let her. Runa named her Chi-chan and started making ribbons for the toy. She dressed her up in clothes she made out of handkerchiefs and began doting on the cat."

As I imagined a young Runa, her cuteness brought a smile to my face and made my chest tight.

"And as I watched that happen, Chi-chan started looking really cute to me. I started regretting letting go of her. So when Runa was about to go outside with Chi-chan, I asked to have her back, and Runa got really angry. She shouted, 'No!' and hit me. I was only six or something like that at the time, but I remember it clearly. She was really scary in that moment."

Kurose-san lightly bit her lip and hung her head. "Looking back on it now, I think I was in the wrong. But she didn't have to get *that* angry at me either. I cried my eyes out when that happened." She looked up with a faint, awkward smile on her face. Her gaze was directed at the crescent moon hanging low in the night sky. "I looked up to Runa. I wanted things that she loved. Maybe it didn't have to be Chi-chan." Kurose-san then smiled at me as I had been listening in silence. "We're really nothing alike, right?"

“Y-Yeah...”

“By itself, being cute isn’t enough to become popular. Runa is loved because she’s Runa. That’s her talent.”

Kurose-san had a lot to say about Runa. When we talked about gameplay videos, we were able to participate in the discussion about equal amounts. But when it came to Runa, it must’ve been this way because she knew a lot more about her than I did. I figured she really wanted to say these things too.

That’s right. Kurose-san loves Runa. Even now. Enough that she wants to talk about her so much to someone.

“I envy Runa...” she said. “I didn’t have the talent of making people like me.”

It was heartrending how her profile revealed her feelings as she gazed up at the moon.

She’s beautiful. Always has been.

I’d loved this view to death. And my slim, short-lived hopes had been crushed four years ago when I’d confessed to her.

“That’s not true. You’ve been popular since your first year of middle school,” I said, recalling those days. A bitter feeling developed deep in my throat.

Had my heart not been broken that day, I would’ve been a whole different person. I’d only been able to confess to Runa because I’d intended to end my reckless unrequited love early on—after all, I’d been prepared to get rejected, just like it had happened back then.

The present lay right next to the past. I didn’t have any experience in romance, but it wasn’t like I’d never loved anyone before. If falling in love with someone and having that love be buried counted, then I most definitely *had* loved before.

I gave my first love to you. You might have had no use for it, but nonetheless, I don’t regret having fallen in love with you.

“Since middle school, huh,” uttered Kurose-san quietly as though digesting my words. “I was full of lies back then.” A self-deprecating smile developed on her face, and she looked at me. “That was me acting like a girl like Runa. So you

fell in love with Runa, after all.”

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “You’re you.”

She was completely different from Runa, even back then. I liked Kurose-san for who she was.

“So...I think a lot of people will come to love you in the future, if they understand what you’re really like,” I told her.

Her expression remained sullen, however. “A lot of people, you say...” she uttered with a sad smile, then looked at the moon with a distant gaze. “I guess I’ll never match that moon, huh.” Given that Runa’s name included the kanji for “moon,” Kurose-san must’ve been referring to that.

Then, I realized what she really felt.

“I’ll keep liking you as much as I want. That’s all.”

I felt like I now understood the true feelings hidden behind those words she’d said to me on the rooftop on the sports day.

Since that day, I’d been wondering about those words. She should’ve known full well I had no intention of breaking up with Runa, so why would she want to keep liking me?

I also recalled what Tanikita-san had said when Icchi had confessed to her at the cultural festival.

“Confessing your love isn’t a game. If a gacha has a one-in-ten chance of winning, you can spin it ten times and win once, but if you confess to the same person ten times with the same timing, that doesn’t mean it’ll go well one of those times. When there’s no chance, there’s really no chance. It’s not even like you can save scum in real life.”

“Isn’t it important not to be pushy with your feelings when it comes to love?”

At the time, I had thought about Kurose-san. Thinking that she loved me that much had shaken me.

But that wasn’t it. She simply didn’t play the gacha as she knew it wouldn’t give her what she wanted. Instead, she’d been waiting for a bug in it that could happen by chance. A glitch that would make me choose her instead of Runa.

It must've been painful. I'd always been thinking only about my relationship with Runa and worrying about how I should deal with Kurose-san.

Had I noticed Kurose-san's true feelings from the start, I might've been able to more quickly notice the path I should take. I felt guilty about it.

"You should value your own world. Are you okay with the idea of not having any female friends your whole life?"

Sekiya-san had said that to me, but I figured there was an order to things.

I had never had a single female friend before I'd started going out with Runa in the first place. It had been rare for me to even talk to a girl at all.

Everything had begun with Runa. I'd discovered a new world because I'd started dating her.

Had it not been for Runa, I wouldn't have grown close to Kurose-san after I'd seen her again. And surely I would've gone through this school year without having had a single conversation with either Yamana-san or Tanikita-san. I would've lost out on those opportunities.

All of this had happened because I had Runa. Runa was the most important thing to me. If it meant I'd lose her, I didn't need to be close to any other girls.

I was different from Sekiya-san. The mere concept of having female friends had never existed in my world from the start.

And so, I figured this choice was the right one for me.

After we'd walked in silence for some time, I said, "I'm sorry, Kurose-san."

Kurose-san gave me a puzzled look.

I continued. "We probably shouldn't talk alone like this anymore."

Her eyes widened and the expression on her face froze up.

"You're a wonderful girl, and we have the same interests... It was fun talking to you. So... I'm really sorry I kept this up until now." I spoke haltingly, not looking at her face. "Maybe if time passes...and if one day we get to become friends again...I want to talk to you again then."

I knew it was selfish to say that. She might not want to become friends again

with the kinda guy who one-sidedly said things like this. In fact, that seemed like the most likely option.

However, this was the only path I could choose.

“It hasn’t been long, but thank you for being one of my few friends,” I said.

When I looked at Kurose-san again, her expression was unexpectedly soft. “I should be the one thanking you,” she replied. There was a calm smile on her face, as though she’d been prepared for this day to come.

At some point, we’d reached the convenience store where we were to part ways.

“Goodbye...” I said. Although I’d brought up the matter, I couldn’t think of a way to extend the conversation any further, so I started to leave, just like that.

“Kashima-kun,” Kurose-san called out. “Can I ask you one last thing?”

“S-Sure.”

When I turned around, Kurose-san gave me a faint smile. “What made you fall in love with me in our first year of middle school?”

“Huh...?”

I didn’t expect to be asked such a thing, so I was too startled to figure out what to say.

I recalled my memories from when I’d been in love with her. The sounds that’d come from the seat next to mine—her breathing, her talking to people, everything else... Back then, every little thing she’d done had made my heart race.

While she’d been cute, she’d been nice, even to me. I’d thought she’d had a crush on me. It had been impossible for me not to fall for her.

“Because you were cute,” I said, unable to come up with a more decent answer no matter how much thought I gave the subject.

“I see.” Knitting her eyebrows just a little, Kurose-san smiled.

There was something on my mind too, and I figured I’d use this opportunity. “Can I ask you something too?” I said. “You rejected me long ago, so why did

you start liking me now...?”

She'd said that she'd fallen for me when, as she'd put it, I'd heard her out and kindly scolded her after she'd spread those rumors about Runa. But was that really all there'd been to it? Had that been enough to fall for someone strongly enough to keep loving them even after they had rejected you?

I wanted to know about the unadorned feelings deep inside her heart.

Kurose-san gazed at me in silence for a while and then smiled as if releasing tension. “A long time ago... When I first met you, the most important thing to me was to have people like me. That was what kept me going after, as I thought, Dad didn't choose me.”

I felt like I'd already heard that before.

“Making a guy *like* you means causing him to have romantic feelings for you, right? I didn't care who liked me—I just wanted as many guys as possible to do so. I was relieved when people confessed to me. I rejected you because I had no intention of going out with anyone. It wasn't important to me to fall in love, as if I started dating someone, I'd lose my popularity with others.”

I listened in silence.

“I fell in love with you...because I started hating that part of myself. And I figured there was no chance of people liking me anymore. I was utterly jealous of Runa, since she stayed popular even while she had a boyfriend. It also frustrated me that you believed Runa more than you believed me. You used to be mine... Back then, I could've just reached out... If I'd done that, your kindness would've been all mine... But now, almost all of it is directed at Runa...though you still show some of it to me every now and then... Your kindness was mine for the taking, every last drop of it...” Kurose-san hung her head a little as she spoke, biting her lip. “And as I had these thoughts, my head became full of you.”

I stood there in silence.

She looked up at me. “It's so stupid, right? I know it myself.” Forcing another smile, Kurose-san turned her back to me. “Okay, I'm going now. Goodbye.”

“Right, okay...”

As I looked at her back as she retreated, I thought to myself, *Ah, I see. Maybe I was “Chi-chan” all along.*

I recalled what Yamana-san had said to me the other day.

“If a girl approaches you in the future, you better keep in mind that she’s not focused on you personally, but on Runa.”

Kurose-san looked up to her sister.

“Sometimes a guy who’s not even your type starts to look fifty percent more handsome because if she chose him, then he must be great.”

Just as Tanikita-san had said, that kind of mentality might’ve been at play here.

I felt complicated about it. A part of me was relieved, but a part of me was disappointed too.

Kurose-san walked farther and farther away from me, not turning around once.

She hadn’t been looking at me—she’d been looking at Runa. Didn’t that mean her true happiness lay in restoring her bonds with Runa?

“Maybe I’m overthinking it, though.”

No matter how much thought I gave it, it wasn’t like a virgin like me could figure out the truth. All I could do for now was pray that Runa’s project made progress and the sisters could quickly go back to their old relationship.

There was nothing left for me to do.

As these thoughts went through my head, Kurose-san continued to grow smaller in the distance. She was walking along the last stretch of road leading to her place. It was a narrow back street hundreds of meters long with a dangerous air about it. There was also that desolate shrine in front of her apartment building.

She was about to pass the shrine and was nearly at her apartment building. I figured I’d watch her get inside and then go home, but...

As she was a mere speck in the distance, another figure suddenly appeared

and headed toward her from behind. I watched, feeling uneasy for some reason, and after a short while, I heard a scream. It came from far away and was so quiet that nobody else on the street I was on paid any attention to it.

Since I'd seen that figure earlier, I grew concerned and started running. I couldn't see Kurose-san anymore. Had that scream been just my imagination? Had she already made her way into her apartment building...?

I wanted that to be the case.

And as I was about to run past the entrance to the shrine with that hope in mind...

A black figure jumped out in front of me.

"Whoa!!!"

I jumped back in surprise, and that person—seemingly a man—ran past me.

It wasn't Kurose-san.

I looked around for her, and then...

"Kurose-san?!"

I found her collapsed on the shrine grounds.

"Are you okay?!" I called out as I approached.

She sat up unsteadily. "Kashima...kun...?"

"What happened, Kurose-san...?"

"A man I don't know assaulted me..." she said. Her face was utterly pale, and she was trembling.

The man she mentioned must've been the person who'd jumped out in front of me earlier.

"When I screamed, he pushed me..."

I couldn't just leave her like this, so I lent her my shoulder and helped her up. The suspicious man had long since run away, and I took Kurose-san to a nearby police box.

"Oh, a molester? Yeah, we get those at that shrine..."

“You must’ve been through a lot. Tell us more in this room over there.”

Two police officers came out and led the trembling Kurose-san to the room deeper inside.

“And you are? A friend?” an elderly officer asked me.

I froze up. I...couldn’t say we were friends. Not anymore.

“No... I’m her classmate. I happened to pass by.”

Seeming to have sensed something from my reaction, the officer suddenly assumed a distant attitude.

“Oh, I see. Okay, leave the rest to us. I’m sure your parents will worry if you don’t go home.”

“Ah, yes...”

The sliding door of the police box closed, and with no other option left for me, I began to walk away.

The main street with the police box on it was well lit and had a lot of car traffic. Adults going home from work walked by at a brisk pace on the sidewalk, overtaking me as I walked slowly.

Had I been the way I’d been until today, there was no doubt that Kurose-san would’ve avoided such a fate. I surely would have walked her all the way home.

However, I had chosen *this* path.

But while I thought about that, regret weighed down on my chest and filled me with gloom.

What am I supposed to do...?

After walking absentmindedly for a while with my hands stuck in the pockets of my trousers, I stopped once my apartment building came into view.

I took out my phone and called Runa. She answered on the fifth ring.

“Hello. Ryuto?” she said. “It’s unusual for you to call me all of a sudden! Yay!”

Hearing Runa’s cheerful voice brought me sudden relief and made me all smiles.

“Hi, Runa...”

“What’s up?”

“Hey, can you call your mother?”

Runa seemed to be taken aback by my question. “Huh? My mom?”

“Yeah...” I hesitated for a moment. “Kurose-san just had an encounter with a molester. She’s talking to the police now. They’ll want a parent to pick her up.”

Either Kurose-san or the police officers would surely call about this themselves eventually, so maybe there was no need for me to do this.

Still...

This was the only thing that I, someone who wasn’t even her friend, could do for Kurose-san. She had been suddenly hurt in mind and body by a stranger even though she hadn’t done anything wrong. She must’ve been feeling alone and helpless in front of police officers right now.

Even if we weren’t friends anymore, we were still classmates. I didn’t want to reject even the desire to do something for a fellow human being.

And besides, I needed to talk to Runa too. It seemed to be the only way to clear up the ill feeling in my chest.

“What?! That happened to Maria?! O-Okay, I got it... I’ll try calling Mom...” said Runa, bewildered. “Wait, you were with Maria?”

“About that... Can we meet up for a bit right now? I’ll come by your house.”

There was no reply on the line.

“Runa?” I asked, thinking she might not have heard me.

At that point, a reply finally came. “Ah, okay... Sure...”

For some reason, her voice sounded dark and gloomy.

We met up at a convenience store about fifty meters away from Runa’s house.

I watched her walk over from in front of her place wearing a coat over the

usual clothing she wore at home. There was a brooding expression on her face.

The first thing she said once she came closer was...

“What’s going on? Is this something we have to talk about today, even this late?”

“Yeah. So...”

I was about to begin talking, but tears suddenly spilled from Runa’s eyes.

“Wh-What’s wrong?!”

“I can’t,” she said. She pushed me away as I panicked, and she wiped her tears with her fingers. “I can’t do this... And it’s Maria, right? I just can’t take it...”

“Take what?” I asked. “What I’m trying to say is...”

“No!” she exclaimed, shaking her head like an unruly child. “I won’t hear it, okay...? You haven’t told me anything yet, so I’ll pretend you never called me out here...”

“What’re you...?”

“You cheated on me, didn’t you? With Maria... Though of course, since it’s you we’re talking about, it’d be ‘a change of heart’ instead of ‘cheating’...”

“N—”

“It’s fine!” She cut me off, sounding desperate. “If it’s you, I can forgive cheating...! I won’t contact you for a while, so calm down and give it some thought. Don’t tell me you wanna break up... Come back to me...”

“You got it wrong, Runa,” I said.

“Goodbye...”

As she turned around, it felt like everything was in slow motion. I wanted to call out and stop her, but my voice wouldn’t come out. She had already started walking away.

“W—”

I wanted to tell her to wait, but my voice was caught in my throat.

I'd always looked up to the way KEN played shooters—he was quick and didn't hesitate when taking shots. I, on the other hand, was indecisive, and it showed in my gameplay too.

Which enemy was I supposed to target first? How would my allies act? It was scary to get shot... Intrusive thoughts like that would chip away at my concentration, and before I knew it, I'd lost the opportunity to aim my shots.

It was the same in the real world.

When Runa's phone had broken in the school hallway that time. And on that rainy day when I couldn't chase after her back. Both times had led to long periods of regret afterward, even though the answer inside me had always been clear from the start.

My heart was always directed at Runa at any given time. But if I ran after her and she rejected me... The thought of being hurt by that scared me.

But was it really okay to stay that way forever?

The *two* of us were the ones who were dating each other. I'd always let Runa choose where to go for our dates or decide where our relationship was headed. I'd always let her be the one to say what she wanted to do.

Was I really okay with that? Wouldn't it make sense for Runa to become worried?

I had to show some courage. The courage to say what I wanted to happen.

"Wait, Runa!"

My loud voice drew the curious stare of an office worker who'd just stepped out of the convenience store.

Runa stopped for a moment. Taking this opportunity, I caught up to her and grabbed her hand.

"I told you, you got it wrong," I began, but she kept her back turned to me. "You're always like this. Always running away without hearing me out. We should *talk*. Didn't you say that yourself?"

Shaking off my hand, Runa turned to face me. “I don’t wanna... It’s scary... It’s *scary*, okay...?” As she looked up at me, her eyes were wet with tears. “I don’t want my important people to leave me anymore... I wanna become a family with you, and if you leave me, I’ll be losing someone who’s just as important as my family again.”

As we stood by a utility pole next to the convenience store, passersby pretended not to see us as they went on their way.

“I was thinking I shouldn’t fall in love with you any more than I already have,” she continued. “I wanna stop my feelings from growing; I wanna run away... But you never betray me. You wait for me, as selfish as I am... Why? Why is it me? I’m not such a good girl.”

“Runa...”

“I’m worried. If I stay like this...you might go to a different girl one day.” She stopped me with her eyes before I could speak further and looked down. “Maria has substance. Not like me, somebody who’s simply swept by the currents... Even I would want to date Maria instead of me, if I was a guy.”

“That’s what you’ve been thinking?” I asked.

The discomposure I’d felt until now settled down as I listened to Runa lay her heart bare. Even though she was such a wonderful girl, she still had her own complexes. She looked up to people who had things that she didn’t. That human side of her made her feel closer. I found it sweet.

“Okay, then let me start with this,” I began again, prompting Runa to look up at me. “You’re the only one I want to date. Now and forever.”

Joy immediately spread through her face.

It was an embarrassing thing to say, but this was no time to be shy. No matter how endlessly deep my love for her ran, if I didn’t show it with my words and actions, it was as good as nonexistent—at least as far as Runa was concerned.

The reason I hadn’t told Runa about everything that had happened between me and Kurose-san until now wasn’t because I’d had an ulterior motive. I hadn’t been hoping for a shot to be with Kurose-san. Instead, it was because I’d been thinking of the relationship between the two sisters. If I’d told Runa everything

and it made things more awkward between them, that wasn't a desirable outcome for me.

But if this half-hearted attitude of mine, which had used kindness as an excuse, had ended up making Runa worried... It was only natural that a guy like that didn't set her heart aflutter.

Whether I told Runa about them or not, the things that had happened between me and Kurose-san wouldn't change.

I'd say everything, and then it would be up to the two of them to decide what to do afterward. I would believe in Runa and release the worries from her mind.

As I had these thoughts, Sekiya-san's words flashed through the back of my mind.

"There are some things people are better off not knowing. Being faithful doesn't mean sharing every single thing with your girlfriend."

Maybe he was right. But there was something else that Runa had said to me before.

"We're completely different and all. So we might have misunderstandings, like the other day... So I think we should tell each other our thoughts so it doesn't come to that again."

I wasn't dating Sekiya-san. I was dating *Runa*.

That was why I should've believed what Runa had said to me. From the beginning, and before consulting other people.

After a long silence, I took in a deep breath and spoke up. "I was never popular with girls and I'm not good at this... I'm sorry this is the only way I can show my sincerity." As Runa didn't seem to understand what I was saying, I continued. "Earlier tonight, I quit being friends with Kurose-san. So I can't help with your Friendship Project anymore."

"Huh...?" She held her breath for a moment. "What do you mean?! But you said she had an encounter with a molester... Weren't you together?"

"Well, we ran into each other at Station K on our way home from cram school... It happened after we went our separate ways. I don't think she

would've been assaulted had I been together with her."

Runa remained silent.

"What I'm about to say might give you mixed feelings...but I wanted to tell you my honest feelings toward Kurose-san," I said.

She nodded lightly with a stern look on her face.

"In summer, someone took a picture of me and Kurose-san supposedly hugging each other... The day before that, she called me to a gym storage room and confessed to me."

Runa continued to look at me, holding her breath.

"We were alone together and she clung to me... And then I pushed her down."

Runa's eyes widened.

"Of course, I didn't do anything more than that... I'm sorry I kept it from you until now."

In reality, there'd been more to the story—Kurose-san had called me while mimicking Runa's voice to get me there and had acted like her while seducing me. But saying anything else at this point would just be making excuses.

"So after that and everything else...it was difficult not to see Kurose-san as a girl. I thought it was best I stopped being friends with her."

Runa was silent for a while. "Why didn't you go all the way?" she asked eventually. "You were alone with her in the gym storage room, right?"

She gazed at me with a face that betrayed no emotion. It was scary, but I had no choice but to answer her.

"Because I wanted my first time to be with you."

Was I too much of a virgin for saying that? There was nothing I could do, though. This was who I was. If I tried to show off, the truth would slip out eventually.

"Oh, but it's not like I would've been okay with cheating on you if I'd had sex before," I added. "It's just that...I still can't imagine what it would be like after

that... It doesn't feel real."

Runa gazed at me for a while after that. "Didn't you love Maria, though?"

"That was back in my first year of middle school."

Despite my answer, the clouds didn't leave her face.

"I've never gone through with a one-sided love...but I think it's a really powerful feeling when you fall in love with someone and want to tell them that," Runa said, hanging her head somewhat. She seemed to be reflecting on every word I'd said. "Every time I think how you felt that way about Maria, things start to feel so hopeless. Normally I try not to think about it, though." She seemed to be in pain as she spoke, which made me depressed too. "I'm scared. So...earlier, when you said you wanted to talk, I thought you might've switched over to Maria."

"Runa..."

"I'm happy that you stopped because of me, but I hate myself for the fact I'm sure I'll get worried in the future every time I remember that you used to love Maria..."

Tears welled up in her eyes again.

"Then what should I do?" I asked, having no answer to the situation. "No matter how much I love you now, the fact that I'd once fallen in love with Maria and confessed to her won't change. If that will bother you no matter what, then..."

As I considered whether I should say it or not, my throat, eyes, and the depths of my nose grew hot.

There's no way, right?

Am I going to...? Here in public, with people walking by...? And in front of my girlfriend...?

But despite those thoughts, it was too late to stop myself.

"We can't...keep going out..." I said.

It felt like a hot drop of water had fallen from the inner corner of my right

eye.

I was crying. It was disgraceful, but it was the truth. While I was baffled by it, I couldn't stop the pain in my heart.

In truth, I didn't want to say something like that. I absolutely didn't want to break up with Runa. I wanted us to be together forever. From the bottom of my heart.

But still.

"You can't do anything about the past..." I said.

If time machines existed and I could use one to go back to my first year in middle school...I'd tell myself from the past that a really wonderful girl would appear in the future, and unbelievably enough, she'd become my girlfriend. I'd stress to him that he shouldn't confess to any other girls.

But that wasn't an option. Time machines *didn't* exist.

Why did Runa only say things like this to me? Truth be told, even I... If we were talking about stuff like this, even I didn't want Runa to have dated anyone before. Anyone other than me.

But that felt like the one thing I wasn't allowed to say as I understood it full well in my mind. Had it not been for her past experiences, Runa as she was now wouldn't be in front of me now.

"I'm sorry, Ryuto. Don't cry."

I came back to my senses when something fluffy touched my face. Runa was wiping my tears with the sleeve of her at-home top.

She was crying too.

"I was wrong," she said, gazing at me with reddened eyes. "I was supposed to know better than anyone that nothing can be done about the past." With that, Runa clung to me as though she were leaping into my arms. "You accepted me, so I'll accept your past too. All of it—including the part where you loved Maria."

A floral-or-fruity scent tickled my nostrils. I tightly hugged her warmth that felt so good to the touch.

“I want us to become the kind of couple who love each other for real. So I have to face your past as it really is, you know?”

As she spoke into my ear, emotions came over me.

“Runa...”

“I’m sorry, Ryuto. I won’t run anymore. No matter what happens between us in the future.” With that, she pulled away and looked at me. “Now that I think about it, what I was worried about wasn’t your past. I was worried about how you feel now. I still think there’s some part of you left that loves Maria. She’s cute, after all.”

“I do think she’s nice,” I admitted.

As late as it was, I was embarrassed about having cried. I sniffled quietly and tried to act like it had never happened.

“That’s why I quit being friends with her,” I then added.

Guilt ate away at me as I recalled Kurose-san trembling after her encounter with the molester. But still...

“You’re the one I love. But if Kurose-san’s thinking well of me too... If I stayed friends with her, I couldn’t say for sure that there’d never be a moment in the future that could make you worried.”

That was why this was the only way forward. And I hoped that the guy who’d assaulted Kurose-san would get caught soon.

“You’re too honest, you know,” Runa said suddenly. “Most guys would lie about this. They’d say something like ‘I only see you’ or ‘I don’t have eyes for any other girl.’”

Perhaps remembering the past, Runa clasped her hands behind her back and kicked at the ground as if having nothing else she could do.

“They cheat, though. Guys who say things like that.” Her face clouded over and Runa shook her head. “I’m sick of that, so I’m happy you’re so honest,” she said, hanging her head. There was a faint smile on her face.

“I’m sorry I can’t do this any other way. If I knew my stuff better...I might’ve been able to keep helping with your Friendship Project.”

Runa shook her head. "I'm the one who should apologize. I kept being wrong about everything." She looked down again with a bittersweet expression on her face. "I didn't really want to be *friends* with Maria, but *sisters*. I got you caught up in this whole 'Friendship Project' thing...and it ruined your relationship with Maria as a result..."

She shared her thoughts while she hung her head. The light from the convenience store lit up her cheek and made her skin shine white. Runa probably wasn't wearing makeup right now, but even in this situation, she was utterly beautiful.

"I was scared, so I couldn't approach her directly. Maria hates me, after all," she said sorrowfully. Runa looked up at me. "I'm sorry that me being a coward made trouble for you. Maria was your first love, so of course you couldn't *not* see her as a girl just because you're going out with me..."

As I silently looked on, Runa continued.

"Despite that, you say you love me, but in the end, I pretty much tested you..."

She then went quiet, as though in regret. The silence lasted for a while.

After some thought, I spoke up. "I don't think Kurose-san hates you."

"Huh...?"

"She said she transferred to this school because she wanted to please you. But when she saw how you reacted, she felt betrayed...and so she ended up doing what she did."

Runa stared at me with surprise written on her face.

"And besides, she's taking good care of that moon earring and carrying it around. She said you gave it to her."



“Huh...?”

“I saw it,” I said. “The earring that matches the one you have, the one with the moon and star. If she’d gotten it from a sister she hated, she would’ve thrown it away a long time ago instead of carrying it around, right?”

Holding her breath, Runa brought a hand to her mouth in apparent disbelief. “So that’s how it was...” She then lowered that hand to her chest and closed her eyes. Her long eyelashes trembled. “Maria...” she said softly.

It felt like there was love in her voice that hadn’t been there before.

When Runa next opened her eyes, there was an intent in them that hadn’t been there moments ago.

“I should’ve known for a long time now that Maria could be difficult and stubborn. But we were apart for so long... I think that at some point, an invisible gap appeared between us.” Gazing at the asphalt, Runa sounded gloomy, like she was lamenting the lost time. “I’d speak to her every now and then and she’d say she hated me... And that cold attitude she’d give me... At some point, I started to think she might really mean it, so I couldn’t act toward her the way I’d used to.” After saying that, Runa looked up. “But if Maria transferred to our school for my sake and still has the earring I gave her...that means she feels the same way she did in the past, right? In that case, I’ll have to do what I can to move forward.” Her eyes were blazing with determination. “I’ll do that so I can go back to being not friends with her, but sisters.”

As I watched over her growing resolution, Runa directed her eyes straight at me.

“Thank you, Ryuto.”

Her smile, white and radiant like the moonlight, was as dazzling as that of a goddess.

“Thanks to you, I might be able to get something important to me back that I’d once lost sight of.”

Chapter 2.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“And so I ended up putting an end to the Friendship Project.”

“I see... Also, that sounded hella risky. If you ran away there, couldn't that've led to a breakup just like that?”

“Well... I didn't wanna break up, but I might've put distance between us, like that other time...”

“‘Distance,’ huh...”

“Oh, sorry.”

“It's okay, I'm used to it. I went years without seeing him, after all. It was always my unrequited love. Things are just a bit better now compared to before.”

“Don't worry; it'll be March before you know it.”

“It's scary. Will he really start seeing me again in March?”

“Why wouldn't he?”

“Don't guys always somehow make time for the girl they truly love, no matter how busy they are?”

“Is that how it works?”

“It is, yeah. Whenever people told me their own stories, it always ended up that if a girl's boyfriend couldn't make time for her, that meant she wasn't his main girl.”

“Now that you mention it... I think my exes would ask to come over when we started dating, but then they'd start to get busy and we wouldn't see each other much...”

“And so, I gotta wonder if senpai has another girl...”

“Th-There’s no way! Sekiya-san is *really* busy with studying. He studies for thirteen hours a day! He doesn’t even have time to see other girls.”

“Damn... Maybe I should go to cram school too.”

“For real?!”

“Of course not. Man, this sucks... I hate myself for being unable to believe in him and just wait.”

“Nicole...”

“He’s changed... I mean of course he has; it’s been three years. However, some things about him haven’t changed... But before I could figure out what exactly was different and what was the same, things ended up like this.”

“I see...”

“The guy I knew was serious and devoted to ping-pong. He was awkward with girls and wasn’t the type who could two-time or anything. If he was the same as he used to be, I’m sure I’d be able to believe in him and support him even if he put distance between us... Just like back then.”

“Back when you were his team’s manager?”

“Yeah... It was fun for me to cheer for him. He worked really hard.”

“Isn’t he working hard at studying now too?”

“Even if he is, it’s not something I can see... If you can’t fully trust a person, you can’t support them from the bottom of your heart, right? I want to have faith in him, but I don’t know what he’s really like nowadays.”

“I guess you’d get worried if you went years without seeing him. And there’s a chance he’s somebody completely different from the person you once knew now since he’s been in a different environment.”

“Exactly. You don’t need to worry about stuff like that, though, right?”

“Huh?”

“You only really got to know Kashima Ryuto after you started dating him. Aren’t you in the middle of getting to know each other from zero and falling in love with each other?”

“Ah, yeah, if you’re talking about Ryuto.”

“Huh?”

“I was thinking about Maria, actually.”

“Your sister?”

“We always had the kind of relationship where I dragged Maria around and she’d complain while reluctantly following me.”

“Isn’t that still the same?”

“Unlike when we were kids, I couldn’t figure out what Maria really thought anymore. I thought I couldn’t be pushy with her. Maria used to love me, and she seemed to have fun doing things with me. I started doing ballet at one point, but even after I quit, Maria stuck with it, so I was confident that I was a good influence on her.”

“Wait, you did ballet?! That’s the first I heard of it.”

“It was when I was just in the senior class of kindergarten! I quit in March.”

“Yeah, I guess it wouldn’t stick, then.”

“Maria kept at it, even after starting primary school. It looks like she stopped after our parents divorced, though, since she couldn’t keep going to the same ballet class after moving.”

“What a waste.”

“I know, right? I think she probably didn’t want to look for a new school and go there alone. Maria is shy, after all. She once told me she wouldn’t have bothered starting to learn something had I not been with her.”

“I guess you were her wings, huh.”

“Huh...?”

“Oh, maybe I should’ve said you led her into battle? Wait, crap, my old delinquent side is showing.”

“Aha ha... ‘Wings,’ though, huh... That has a cool ring to it. Guess you’re not called a poet for nothing.”

“Yeah, well.”

“I would fly around, taking Maria with me...and if she had fun somewhere I took her, I was happy. I even took her to things I had no interest in at all if I thought it was something Maria would be into.”

“You understand each other well. That’s twins for you, I guess.”

“It’s just...I completely stopped understanding her once we spent time away from each other. When we lived together, Maria didn’t watch those ‘gameplay videos’ or whatever. She didn’t do cosplay either.”

“She does cosplay?”

“Shoot, that’s a secret! I let it slip.”

“It’s not like I’d tell anyone.”

“Thanks for keeping a lot of stuff secret for me, Nicole.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll have to be careful not to say it by accident to Akari, though.”

“Aha ha, yeah, Akari lets things slip without any ill will.”

“All while she asks us not to tell anyone she’s a fan of Ijichi Yusuke too. Remember how just yesterday, she was all like, ‘Ijichi-kun used this blackboard eraser! It’s the best thing ever!’ She obsessed over it for five minutes. Like, she’s your typical creepy fan at that point.”

“Aha ha, everyone looked annoyed and kept telling her to chill out.”

“Still, I respect her ability to take action when it comes to things she likes.”

“Right? I’m thinking of doing my best too.”

“About your sister?”

“Yeah. I’m going to open up her world once more.”

An earring with a moon and a star hung from an accessory stand on Runa’s shelf. Gazing at it from atop her bed, she continued speaking.

“It’s a bit scary, but I wanna try.”

Chapter 3

We started taking end-of-term tests the next day, and during homeroom at the end of the last day of testing, we got our results back from day one's tests.

I'd had to study for cram school too, so I'd been worried about how I'd done on my regular school tests. I hadn't had as much time to study for them as I'd used to, but my results were roughly the same as always.

When giving back our results, the teacher in charge of our class would announce the highest-scoring student in each subject. There weren't any subjects that I was far better at than everyone else, so I'd never had my name announced that way. Usually, the same people held the top spots every time, so it wasn't an announcement to get excited about.

Right now, the home economics test results were being given out. With vague subjects like that one, the top scorer changed every time.

"The top scorer was Kurose-san with ninety-four points. Congratulations on first place," said the teacher.

Kurose-san went to the front of the class and happily accepted her test paper.

The day after we'd stopped being friends, Kurose-san had come to school normally. Nothing had been different about her after that either. While I didn't think she hadn't been affected by her encounter with a molester, she'd still managed to get good scores on her tests. I was glad that things hadn't changed with her.

"Wow, amazing!"

"I only got thirty points..."

Then, without warning, amid the sound of my classmates chatting, a clear, cheerful voice resonated through the classroom.

"Way to go, Maria! I'm proud of my little sister!"

"Huh...?"

I could tell that our classmates who'd heard Runa's words didn't take her seriously. There was just an air of confusion in the room, as though they were wondering if Runa and Kurose-san really were on such good terms.

Runa stared at our classmates in puzzlement. "What? You guys didn't know? Did I never say it? Maria's my twin."

"What, seriously?" asked Tanikita-san. "You're kidding, right?"

Runa shook her head. "It's true! Our parents are divorced, so that's why our surnames are different. Right, Maria?"

From how Kurose-san looked, she was either astonished or overcome with emotion. She nodded, her face beet red. I could tell she was flustered at suddenly being the center of attention.

"Really?!"

"No way, right?!"

"For real?!"

Amazed voices instantly started coming from all over the classroom—there was a bit of pandemonium spreading.

As for Kurose-san, she stood there with flushed cheeks and a dreamy expression on her face despite being in the center of it all. Her eyes looked moist too.

Even after school, after all the test results had been returned, there was still an excited air in the classroom.

Runa sat next to Kurose-san, and the two were surrounded by extroverted girls. Those who couldn't join in, like myself, looked on from farther away at the twins of the hour.

Tanikita-san was sitting in front of Kurose-san. "I *did* think there was something strange in the air between you two, but if you're related, it makes sense," she said, folding her arms and nodding. "Runy was acting too friendly with Kurose-san, and it made Kurose-san confused. And you gotta consider what happened during the first school term. Like, how are you supposed to be

on good terms? But Runy wanted to have Kurose-san in her group for both the cultural festival and the school trip, and Kurose-san accepted both while looking like she was against the idea... I had a lotta questions about what was going on between you two, you know.”

Several girls nearby nodded, showing that they felt the same. I had often seen Runa talk to those particular girls in our classroom.

“Until now, I couldn’t tell what Runy was thinking, and I didn’t know if Kurose-san was a good or a bad girl, so I couldn’t really get to know her better. I did actually want to talk to her, though.”

Kurose-san was still shrinking in embarrassment.

Tanikita-san then spoke directly to her without hesitation. “I always wanted to ask—is that a *Twister* pen you’ve got there? One of those they sold last year together with the acrylic standees.”

Tanikita-san was pointing at a silver ballpoint pen sitting on Kurose-san’s desk. Kurose-san used that one all the time, and it had some logo on it. Now that Tanikita-san mentioned it, it did look like merch. I’d never paid much attention to it, though.

“You know *Twister*?” asked Kurose-san timidly.

I’d heard that word somewhere before... If memory served me right, it was a soshage popular with girls.

“I absolutely do! I used to be a Disney fan too! There’s some bad blood between Disney fans and *Twister* fans, though, so I was done and left that fandom because I like *Twister* too.”

“I-I see...” Kurose-san was completely overwhelmed by Tanikita-san’s energy.

“Hey, you wouldn’t happen to be a bit of a geek by any chance, would you?”

“Huh? Y-Yeah, I am...”

“For real?! Hey, can I call you Mia?” Tanikita-san asked.

“Mia...?”

“It’s what I wanted to call you if I got to know you better!”

As Kurose-san remained gobsmacked by Tanikita-san, Runa watched over her sister, all smiles.

“Hey, Kurose-san, you went to a girls’ school before, right? Tell us what it was like!”

“Your hair is so pretty! What shampoo do you use?”

After Tanikita-san had started it, other girls around them started striking up conversations with Kurose-san one after another. Flurried as she was, Kurose-san happily tried to reply to them all.

“Maria’s hair is really pretty! My hair’s been getting so damaged since I started dyeing it, so I’m jelly,” said Runa, rousing the crowd further, which prompted Kurose-san to fidget awkwardly in return.

Kurose-san was surrounded by classmates, and as I watched, I remembered what she’d been like when she’d first transferred here.

What was different now, however, was that she wasn’t forcing herself to get people to like her by imitating Runa. Instead, she was being her true self—a stubborn girl who was a bit shy and had geeky hobbies.

And now she had Runa beside her.

Thus, Runa’s Friendship Project had transformed into a Sisterhood Project—and now it had been successfully completed.

There was no role left for me. Perhaps Kurose-san would never smile at me again as we weren’t even friends anymore.

But that was for the best.

Seeing her reserved smile as she was surrounded by our classmates filled me with emotion.

She’d obtained the precious thing that she must’ve always wanted deep down.



Watching it made me happy as if it were happening to me.

“Hey, Ryuto!” Runa called out to me later that day.

We’d planned to go home together, so I’d waited for her at the shoe racks. It had taken her a bit of time to show up.

“Hey, Runa. Where’s Kurose-san?” I asked.

“She’s still in the classroom! Apparently, she’ll be going home with Akari and some other girls.”

“I see.”

We put on our outdoor shoes and left through the entrance side by side.

“That sure was direct,” I remarked.

“Yeah. I figured that was my shot and left things to chance. My heart was actually, like, *pounding*, though. Aha ha. If Maria looked unhappy with it, I was gonna say, ‘Of course I’m joking! I just meant she’s cute like a little sister’ or something like that.”

But there’d been no need for it. Kurose-san had actually been waiting for that all along. For the day when everyone would see her and Runa as sisters.

It had been that simple all this time.

But as simple as it had been, it had surely been impossible for Kurose-san to create an opportunity for it to happen after what she’d done to Runa in the past.

And Runa, after having that done to her, had thought Kurose-san hated her. She felt she couldn’t be pushy with her sister.

And what broke the stalemate...

“It’s all thanks to your courage,” I said.

“Yeah. Though...” Runa began, pausing to look up at me beside her. “I got that courage from you, Ryuto.” Her large, glistening eyes pierced right through me, reaching my heart. “You peeked inside Maria’s heart for me... You were kind to her, and she opened her heart to you... That was what let us get back to how

we used to be.” Runa gazed at me with a calm smile on her lips. “It’s thanks to you.”

The warmth in her voice enveloped me, and I was suddenly overcome with so much happiness that I felt like crying.

Seeing Kurose-san again after all those years hadn’t been meaningless for either of us.

I’m glad I fell in love with you once.

I hope you’ll come to feel that way too, one day.

And I pray that, if and when such a time comes, you’ll be the happiest person in the entire world.

After that day, we didn’t have classes again until the end-of-term ceremony a week later.

My early winter break consisted of preparing for winter courses at my cram school in the study room there and occasionally seeing Runa or talking to her on the phone.

One evening when I was in my room and on a video call with Runa, she suddenly brought up a certain topic.

“Ryuto, there’s something I wanna talk to you about.”

“What is it?”

“Do you mind if we change our plans for the Christmas dinner party just a bit?” she asked.

“Not at all. What’s up?”

We’d been planning to have a party on Christmas Eve at Runa’s house together with her family. She’d be cooking something for us to eat.

“Um...” Runa began hesitantly. She looked as cute as she always did in her fluffy at-home hoodie. “I’ve got this dream I’ve never given up on.” Although she spoke quietly, I could sense a strong will in her voice. “I wanna live in the

same house with Maria and everyone else again. With both my mom and dad... Though I know it would be difficult to have my older sister there since she has her own life now.”

“Right...”

Her parents are divorced, though... But as I thought that, Runa continued.

“I know it’s impossible with the way things are now. So...I want Mom and Dad to get married again.”

“What...?!”

“I don’t think it’s impossible,” she said. “I think my dad still loves my mom, and Mom is single right now... They were each other’s first and they had three children—there’s no way she hates him, I think.”

“But how do you want them to get back together?” I asked in surprise.

Runa’s reply was spirited. “We’ll do it like they do in *Lisa and Lottie*!”

“In what...?”

“You don’t know the story by that name? My grandma gave me that book when I was in early primary school, saying it was about twins who were just like me and Maria.”

I felt like I’d seen that book in my primary school’s library. I’d never actually read the book, though, so I listened in silence.

“When Lisa and Lottie first see each other, they’re surprised to discover they look identical. One of them lives with her mom and the other with her dad, but they find out they’re actually twins, and when their parents divorced, each of them took one girl and raised them separately. They join forces to bring their parents together, they get remarried, and everyone becomes family again.”

“I see...”

“It’s a really happy story. When I got the book, I never thought our parents would divorce too... I envy my old self.” She’d been speaking ecstatically earlier, but now, her expression had turned a little gloomy. “When I told Maria about this, she said that if I can’t give up on the idea, we can try. So we gave it some thought together. Christmas Eve was our parents’ wedding anniversary. I can

take care of our dad, and Maria can get Mom there—we can throw a party on Christmas Eve and bring them together without them knowing about it in advance. I feel like maybe, if we all eat together for the first time in a long while, Mom and Dad will remember the old days and feel like being a family again.”

Runa had finished her long speech on the other side of the screen. Now, she watched for my reaction—she seemed nervous.

“What do you think?” she asked. “Is it too simple? Do you think it’d go okay?”

“Well... Um, I do think it would be great if things ended up like that. I’d just be in the way if I were there, though, right?”

At the very least, I figured I shouldn’t be at that dinner party.

Runa shook her head, however. “No, I want you to come! Dad seems a little busy these days and Grandma will be on a trip with her hula friends over Christmas. It felt like we’re not going to be spending the holiday together this year.”

“I see.”

“So, I was gonna say to my dad that I want to introduce my boyfriend to him to make sure he comes. And Maria would invite our mom to eat out so she can take a break from work.”

“Makes sense...”

I still thought that if she wanted to bring her parents together, it was probably better for the family to meet up without any outsiders. But since this was what Runa had said, I figured it’d be okay for me to be present and maybe sneak out once I saw an opportunity to do so.

“You don’t like the idea? You can’t make it? Ah, I’ll do the cooking, of course, so come to my house afterward! Though you might be stuffed by the end.”

I smiled at Runa. “Sure, I’ll come if you want. I wanted to meet your dad at some point anyway.”

I’d said hello to Runa’s mother on the sports day, but I’d yet to properly meet her father, and he had custody of her. Runa had already met both of my parents

too. I'd been itching to meet her dad when I'd walked her home after our dates, feeling like it was something I had to do as her boyfriend.

"Hooray! I better go tell my dad right away!" Runa exclaimed animatedly. "Christmas Eve is just a week from now, so I better hurry up and get ready! Gotta reserve a table at a restaurant... Oh yeah, maybe I should write letters to Mom and Dad!"

Watching Runa start to excitedly plan things brought a smile to my face. Hopefully, her plan would succeed. Christmas Eve was just a week away, and I wished that it would become an unforgettable day for both me and Runa.

In a sense, that wish would come true. But not the way I could've imagined at the time...

On Christmas Eve, the sky was overcast, even since morning. The weather was very wintry with a north wind blowing. When the sun began to set, the outdoor air chilled and dried out any exposed skin. Wearing a coat suitable for a cold winter day like this one, I headed with Runa to the appointed place.

Runa had reserved a table at a café near Station A. Apparently, she'd wanted to go to a restaurant they'd regularly visited as a family, where they'd made many memories. But unfortunately, on top of it being far from her current home, an internet search had revealed that its name had changed since then. As a result, she'd looked for a nearby place with a similar atmosphere to that restaurant instead.

"Ryuto!" Runa called out to me in front of Station A, waving her hand.

As always, she was extremely cute.

Even a guy as clueless about fashion as me could easily sense the Christmas feeling from Runa's outfit—a red down coat over a white knit dress. It made me excited. Both the coat and the dress were mini in length, and while the patch of exposed skin between those and her long boots seemed like it would make her cold, it looked sexy.

"Sure is chilly!" she said right away, twining her arms around mine. Runa's

floral-or-fruity scent was faint in the cold air, but it made me keenly aware that this was my first winter together with her and that elevated my spirits. “Man, my heart’s pounding!”

The cold probably wasn’t the only reason her cheeks were rosy. And while I was happy about the idea that it might’ve also been because she was with me, there was probably a different reason for it.

Her “Lisa and Lottie” plan was about to be put into motion. That must’ve been what made her nervous and excited.

Runa checked her phone as we walked. “Oh, it’s from Maria. She says Mom’s already there.”

“That was quick, huh.”

“Apparently Mom didn’t have to go in today. I hear she’s been working a lot recently, so she was able to take off on Christmas Eve.”

“So she went there with Kurose-san?”

“Yep. Maria said they baked a Christmas cake together earlier today. And it’s a chocolate cake of all things. I asked Maria to bring a piece ’cause I wanna have some too!”

Seeing Runa’s innocent smile somehow filled me with emotion. Maybe that was thanks to getting an unexpected glimpse of her actively staying in touch with Kurose-san. I was also learning a bit about her twin’s daily life with their mother and how they got along well with each other.

“I wish I could’ve gotten my older sister to come too. Oh well, it’s Christmas Eve, so I guess nothing could be done about that.”

Apparently, Runa’s older sister had already had plans for a date with her boyfriend.

“But hey, I have you to make up for it. All right! I’m gonna enjoy the party today while putting my plan into action!” Runa said.

I found the sight of Runa rousing herself to dispel her nervousness to be really sweet.

The reservation was for 5 p.m. and we arrived five minutes early. Today’s

party would be held in a room immediately to the side of the restaurant's entrance.

The restaurant Runa and Kurose-san had chosen after discussing it with each other was a cozy, Spanish-style café with a somewhat stylish atmosphere. The chairs and tables here were on the small side. I wondered if the place the Shirakawa family had used to frequent had looked as comfy as this one.

Runa entered the private dining room and spotted Kurose-san and her mother sitting at the table. "Mom!" she exclaimed.

Upon seeing her, their mother opened her eyes wide. "Runa?! And Ryuto-kun... Why are you here?"

"What do you mean 'why'? I was thinking we could celebrate Christmas together," Runa said.

"What?! What's the meaning of this, Maria?!"

While her mother was astonished, Runa promptly sat down and invited me to sit next to her.

The table in the room could seat six. We were currently arranged with Runa and I on one side, and Kurose-san and their mother on the other. Runa was probably going to lead her father to sit either next to her or to their mother.

"Isn't it fine to do this once in a while? We're family, after all," replied Kurose-san, looking unruffled.

She'd probably invited her mother out here to eat as two, so her mother must've been wondering why they'd been led to a room like this. Though she was visibly taken aback, she seemed to have come to terms with this development on some level.

"So it's *that* sort of surprise, I suppose," their mother said. "Have you told your father?"

Runa and Kurose-san looked at each other.

"Well, kind of... Um..." began Runa falteringly. "Or should I say, he's coming..."

Her mother's eyes widened. "What?! He's coming too?! Here?"

“I’m sorry for keeping quiet about it, Mom,” Kurose-san immediately added. “We wanted to have a Christmas party with everyone, just like the old days. You wouldn’t have come if I’d told you Dad would be here too, right?”

Their mother knit her brows. “I guess not... I don’t want to see him all that much.”

Both Runa’s and Kurose-san’s faces darkened.

“But if you two want us all to meet up, that changes things,” continued their mother. “I’m an adult, and so is your father.”

Runa and Kurose-san opened their eyes wide.

“Then...?”

“Okay. Let’s enjoy Christmas dinner together for the first time in a long while.”

Seeing their mother’s smile, Runa and Kurose-san exchanged glances.

“H... Hooray!”

“But wait, weren’t you two fighting all this time?” their mother continued. “I thought you two managed to make up when Maria said she wanted to transfer to Runa’s school, but you kept it a secret from everyone at school that you’re sisters, right? I was really surprised when I found that out on sports day.”

The sisters’ replies were awkward and vague.

“Well, um...”

“It’s not that we were *fighting*...”

“Well, what does it matter? Just know that we’re on great terms now! Okay, let’s decide on some drinks!” Runa then said cheerfully. She picked a drink menu off the table and passed copies to the two across from her.

The road leading to Runa and Kurose-san’s reconciliation had been a rocky one—explaining what had happened would require mentioning how Kurose-san was jealous of Runa and how she’d spread rumors about her. Runa must’ve figured it wasn’t suitable for the occasion.

“Let’s see... Well, I guess I’m letting loose today!” exclaimed their mother in

an excited voice. She flipped to the page with alcoholic drinks, which prompted the sisters to secretly exchange glances and smiles.

As Runa had explained to me ahead of time, the “Lisa and Lottie” plan went like this: First, a harmonious mood would be created through a partially drunk conversation between the sober sisters and their tipsy parents. Then, Runa and Kurose-san would read aloud the letters they’d written to their parents, which contained the sisters’ feelings for them. Finally, they were going to lead things to their parents getting back together.

I was worried about whether things really would go that well, but for now, everything seemed to be progressing quite smoothly.

There was still the question of how their father would react, but according to Runa, he still had lingering feelings for their mother. Maybe they wouldn’t get back together right away, but today’s dinner party itself was surely going to be a success.

And as I waited there, excited at that premonition and nervous at the prospect of meeting Runa’s father in person...

There was a knock on the door, followed by the voice of a member of the staff. “The rest of your party is here.”

The door opened, and everyone looked that way.

Their father looked stylish and was wearing a suit—he seemed like he had come on his way back from work. He carried a coat in one hand.

Their mother was beautiful too, but since he was Runa and Maria’s father, he was quite the looker himself. I’d previously caught glimpses of him from a distance a few times, but now that I got a closer look, his big, round, and rather gentle eyes were just the same as Kurose-san’s. He had an undercut hairstyle and his sideburns had been shaven off all the way to the top of his ears. It didn’t seem rugged in any way, perhaps because of his relatively slim build. He didn’t look like a typical middle-aged man, and coupled with the fact that his suit fit him, I could tell just from a glance that he was someone who paid attention to his appearance.

He did a slight bow upon entering the room, but then he froze up. “Akie...?!”

That must've been their mother's name.

Runa's mother, meanwhile, looked confused too. "Who is *she*...?"

Taken aback, I looked over to the door and saw another figure behind their father—someone who wasn't a staff member.

"Oh, right..." their father said and beckoned for that person to enter so even I could see them clearly.

The person with him was a petite woman. She looked young, although maybe she was in her thirties. Her appearance suggested that she was an office worker. She had a roundish bob haircut that made her seem more cute than beautiful. Either way, it was probably safe to say her looks were better than average.

"Runa said she wanted to introduce her boyfriend, so...I thought it was a good opportunity for me to introduce someone too. We're planning to move in together in April and I was thinking that I had to tell my family early next year, so..." Their father's speech faltered as he spoke, sounding like he was making excuses.

A stern look appeared on Runa's face. "What's this about?! What's 'living together' supposed to mean...?"

While Runa had lost her presence of mind, her mother was calm. "Are you remarrying?" she asked.

Looking between his ex-wife and the woman behind him, the father was clearly overwhelmed. He nodded regardless. "I am..."

The woman behind him looked at him with a face that said, "You didn't tell me *this* was going to happen." The girls' father drew back, as though unable to endure the pressure.

"So...what's all this about...?" he said.

A hellish silence hung over the room inside this stylish restaurant for a moment.

Runa was the one to break it.

“That’s terrible... How could you...?!” she uttered, shoulders trembling. She then loudly put her head down on the table and began to cry.

“Runa...” I said. All I could do was pat her back.

I didn’t have the presence of mind to look around us, but I could tell from the atmosphere that everyone in the room looked uncomfortable.

In the end, the party had wrapped up just like that. Eating together had been out of the question at that point.

Runa’s mother had intended to pay for it anyway, but a member of the staff had said that since it was Christmas Eve and we hadn’t ordered anything yet, they expected that new customers would use the room right away.

“I feel so bad for causing trouble for the restaurant. Let’s make sure we come eat here another day,” Runa’s mother had said to Kurose-san with a smile.

Compared to Runa, Kurose-san and their mother hadn’t reacted with much emotion.

“It’s already been six years, after all,” Kurose-san had commented.

Their mother had said, “I even got married once since then.”

They’d both left looking somewhat relieved. Apparently, they were going to have dinner at their favorite yakiniku place near Station K instead. They’d invited us to come too, but as Runa had said that she was going home, we’d parted ways.

The father’s fiancée had run out of the restaurant in shock after having seen Runa crying loudly. Her father had chased after the woman.

Which brings us to the present. Runa had her head down on the kotatsu, which served as the dining table in her house. She wasn’t crying anymore, of course, but she was in a lethargic, absentminded state. It didn’t look like she even had the energy to talk to me anymore.

It was to be expected, really.

She'd been so lively this past week. Although she was supposed to have been busy preparing for her plans, it hadn't looked like things had been difficult for her at all, and her eyes had sparkled all the while.

"I've always wanted to go back to that house, where it was all five of us. Where I had Dad, Mom, my older sister...and Maria."

It felt like the sad, vacant eyes she'd had at the time had belonged to a whole different person.

She'd always wanted to go back to that, and she'd thought that she might have actually been able to do so. That hope had made her shine for the past week.

But now, that hope had easily been shattered by the news of her father's upcoming remarriage.

Runa had thought that her father still loved her mother. I couldn't imagine how shocking this had been for her.

The analog clock on the wall was about to point to seven o'clock in the evening. Enjoying Christmas Eve was surely out of the question today.

There wasn't anything I could say to relieve Runa's sorrow. I wasn't a part of her family. I got up quietly, figuring I should let her be alone for now.

"Okay, I guess I should go home for today..."

But the moment I said that, she grabbed my sleeve.

"No. Don't go." Having slightly lifted her head off the kotatsu at last, Runa gazed up at me with upturned eyes. "Don't leave me alone tonight."

Wh-What?!

My heart leaped with a loud enough thud that it felt like it might burst.

"I-It's not like you'll be alone. You have your dad..." I said.

"There's no way he'll come home tonight," she said. "It's Christmas Eve. Of course he'll be with that woman."

“No way...”

Would he really not come home tonight and instead spend time with his girlfriend, even though he had a high-school-aged daughter? What, did being in love make a guy forget he was a father?

“So, please...” said Runa, gazing at me with moist eyes.

The skin around her eyes was red and puffy, and it was sexy... If she looked at me with eyes like those, I...

“I-I can’t, Runa. It’s...”

“Don’t go”? “Don’t leave me alone tonight”?

That meant she was telling me to stay the night, right?!

Runa’s knit dress had cutouts in the shoulder areas, and her smooth fair skin showed through them. Her white thighs peeked out from under the kotatsu...

I gulped unconsciously.

“Why can’t you?” she asked, sweetly tilting her head. She was still holding my sleeve.

“W-Well, how do I explain...?”

Runa’s grandmother was on a trip, and her father wouldn’t be coming home... If I ended up spending the night with her in such a situation, and in her house...

I didn’t think that even a virgin like me could hold out until morning.

“No, seriously, I can’t!” I said.

I’ve decided to respect her wishes... I’m not gonna go for it until she wants to do it...!

With that in mind, I tried to leave, but Runa still pulled on my sleeve.

“Why do you say things like that...?”

Tears quickly welled up in her eyes, trickling down and sexily moistening her lips.

“I don’t want you to go...” she said. “Are you going to abandon me too...?”

Her face was flushed around her eyes down through her cheeks. She was still

wearing her Christmas Eve outfit, and the way she twisted and turned was seductive.

“N-No, it’s just...!”

I closed one eye to resist the tempting sight and try to maintain my sanity.

Runa pleaded with me, though, and narrowed her eyes in distress. “I’m okay with it, you know...” she said. Her absentmindedly parted lips were sexy. My eyes became glued to the red tip of her tongue peeking out. “You can have sex with me if you want...”

Her words caught me off guard.

“So...be with me until morning...”

With that, Runa offered herself to me. I stood there, and she shifted out of a sitting position and began to cling to my legs. She leaned against them with her whole body weight.

I could feel her soft, supple, elastic, feverish touch.

Damn... If this keeps up...something will poke into her forehead...!

Nearly starting to panic, I embraced her shoulders, figuring that whatever would happen would happen.

Wait, something’s too warm...

I’d noticed it since she had started to cling to my legs, but Runa’s body felt unnaturally hot.

“Runa, do you have a fever?” I asked.

It was hard to imagine that this was her simply getting hot under the collar. As my concern surpassed my lust, my reason returned in an instant.

“Huuuh...?” Runa replied, gazing at me with unfocused eyes. Her mouth hung half-open bewitchingly.

Looking back on it, Runa might’ve looked so sexy to me for the past while *because* she had been feverish.

“Where’s the thermometer?”

“It’s in that drawer, over there...”

I managed to find the thermometer despite Runa not clearly showing me where it was. When I removed it from her armpit, I was astonished at the display.

“38.9 degrees?!”

Frightened by a number that was nearly thirty-nine degrees, I was in a fluster.

“Do you have any medicine...? Though I guess it’s better if you get some from a doctor... We could try cold packs, but I’ve heard they don’t have any effect on fevers... Wet towel, then?! Do you have a wet towel?!”

“Wet towel...? Does it have to be wet...? Make it wet, Ryuto...”

That really sounds like she’s talking about something lewd! Is Runa being too sexy when she has a fever, or is my mind just dirty?!

Freaking out, I somehow managed to soak a towel in ice water in a washbowl and prepared to nurse Runa back to health nonetheless.

“Are you okay, Runa? Can you walk to your room?” I asked.

She was still limp at the kotatsu and weakly shook her head. “No... My joints hurt. I can’t move...”

And so, I gave the listless Runa a piggyback ride upstairs. I *did* think she was on the light side, even for a girl, but I didn’t have enough confidence in my strength to carry her upstairs in my arms.

I could feel two supple mounds pressing against my back, their shapes flattening slightly.

“Heh heh...” giggled Runa dreamily. Perhaps the fever had made her consciousness fuzzy.

Her breath tickled as it hit the back of my neck.

“Heh heh heh... It’s your smell...”

“Huh?! ”

Smell?! I was thorough when I took a bath this morning!

Man, I should've taken another shower before going out... I didn't want my family to figure out I was hoping for something, though, so I really couldn't bring myself to do it.

"It's a nice smell... Relieving..." said Runa. Her voice sounded quiet and vacant.

My heart wouldn't stop pounding at this point. For now, I was glad she didn't think I stank.

Incidentally, I'd called my parents a little earlier and told them the truth—that Runa had a fever and her family wasn't home, so I was going to stay the night to look after her. They'd probably been grinning on the other end of the line.



“Ryuto... I love you...”

Man, if only she was feeling okay right now! It's so hard to keep myself in check that I might start shaking.

It was my first time going up a set of stairs with someone on my back, but because I was so riled up, it didn't hurt. It just felt a bit hard to walk.

The elasticity of the skin of her thighs on my hands, the sensations against my back, her breath hitting my neck... Everything was too precious. I didn't know where I was supposed to focus my attention.

I wished I could keep climbing this set of stairs that had only ten steps or so forever.

Of course, whether you might call it a cruel reality or an obvious development, I got to the second floor right away.

“It was this room, right...?”

Opening the door in the back of the hallway, I entered my girlfriend's room for what was the second time now. I'd grown used to seeing it in our video calls, but it had been a while since I'd actually set foot inside. The moment I entered this room filled with her scent, my heart leaped as though I'd just come home, victorious.

Ultimately, however, I was here today to nurse Runa back to health.

Her bed was moderately disheveled. I rolled over the comforter—which she seemed to have simply thrown off herself when she woke up in the morning and left it as it was—and gently laid Runa down on her back.

“Ngh...”

Closing her eyes as she lay listless, Runa let out a cutesy sound and rolled on the bed. Which...resulted in her short knit dress rolling up.

And, would you believe it—peeking from between her thighs was what appeared to be white satin cloth.

“Ahh!” I cried out, and I quickly covered it with Runa's comforter on reflex.

The image of that white, glossy fabric flickered in my retinas.

What a waste, I shouldn't have done that...

However, at the moment, I didn't have any courage left to look at *that* directly.

That's right—I came here to look after Runa. Reminding myself of that fact, I then brought the washbowl up from the first floor.

I picked up a soaked towel, wrung it out a bit, and put it on Runa's forehead.

"Ryuto...?" uttered Runa, narrowly opening her eyes. "For a moment, I thought my mom was here. Not like that was even possible." Smiling sadly, she directed her eyes at the ceiling. "When I was little and had a fever, my mom would often look after me like this."

Runa narrowed her eyes nostalgically—she might have partially been having a fever dream due to her sickness.

"She'd peel apples for me, spoon-feed me ice cream... I didn't have an appetite, but she'd still always give me this or that."

I sat on the floor next to her. "Yeah, parents pay too much attention to you when you have a cold. Even though you want them to leave you alone because you're not feeling well," I replied.

Turning her head to look at me, she smiled a little. "You know, Ryuto, when you're in front of your mom, you act a little cocky."

"What?! R-Really?!" I replied, flustered. I'd never noticed. "Do I really do that...? I don't think I'm going through a rebellious phase or anything, though..."

Maybe I unconsciously acted bluntly with my mother in front of Runa because I didn't want her to think of me as a mama's boy. Her words startled me, and I worried that she might have thought of me as undutiful to my parents.

"Heh heh, I know," replied Runa with a smile, seeming to find this a little funny. "As I watched you, I figured you grew up in an environment where you could be selfish and always had peace of mind... I'm jealous of you." There was a great deal of sadness in Runa's eyes. "When I see my mom, it's too much for me. I get so happy that I turn back into a little girl."

Seeing Runa's self-deprecating smile, I recalled how she'd acted on our sports

day. When her mother had patted her head, she'd looked happy as a child. I'd thought that had been her being a good daughter, but thinking back on it now, it might've been a bit of a strange reaction from a girl who was in high school.

Then, I recalled something else. Runa sometimes asked me to pet her head, like she had on that Ferris wheel after we'd played airsoft.

My heart had pounded that day as I'd gotten a chance to touch Runa...but what if she was asking for such moments of physical intimacy because they brought her the kind of relief she'd received from her mother?

"Maybe if my mom had been with me all along, I wouldn't have wanted a boyfriend so early, even in primary school," said Runa to herself, as though proving my theory. "I love my dad...but now that I think about it, I couldn't open myself up to him as much as I used to after he betrayed us once. Before, I only saw my grandma a few times a year, but after we started living together, I couldn't just demand attention from her. My older sister went to her boyfriend's and almost never comes back... There was no one in this house I could really just be a child with." Gazing at the ceiling with her eyes out of focus due to her fever, Runa went on as though talking to herself. "Mom and Maria weren't here...and I found myself all alone. Sure, I had lots of friends at school...but more than friends, I wanted someone who could be closer to me." It sounded like an earnest plea from the heart. "Someone who would hug me if I was hurt, tell me I was a good girl, and pat my head. Someone who would listen to me talk about stupid stuff for hours, in the morning or at night, and laugh with me... And who could do that besides a boyfriend? I'm not a little girl anymore."

I recalled how Runa was open with physical contact, even with girls. She was all over Yamana-san in particular, and that could even be described as excessive.

I figured that if she sought the same thing with guys, it would obviously go in a sexual direction—maybe her exes getting her into bed right away had to do with more than just them being playboys.

Even I felt my heart pounding and my head swimming every time Runa touched me, which she did often. After what had happened in this room the

first time I'd come here, I'd had to put up with that stuff on a daily basis. Though sometimes I came close to falling to the dark side...

Until now, I'd thought Runa was much more of an adult than me.

But maybe... Maybe, in some part of her mind, she was still a child.

Sure, she had a lot of experiences, but maybe even Runa wasn't as much of an adult as I'd previously thought.

It was the first time this had occurred to me.

"Mom always held me tight before I went to sleep," Runa suddenly said. "Mom..." She narrowed her eyes in distress and they began to shake like the surface of a pond. "It didn't work... Me and Maria couldn't be like Lisa and Lottie... I'll never get to live with Mom again..."

Listening to Runa speak with that trembling voice was hard to endure.

"You have me," I said impulsively and embraced her. "Maybe I can't be a replacement for your mother, but you have me."

"Ryuto..." Runa stretched out her arms as well and wrapped them around me. "Thank you, Ryuto..."

My heart was racing. We were alone together in her room at night on Christmas Eve. I had one knee on her bed and had my arms around her as she lay down.

Stop, you can't have these thoughts now... Runa is ill, I told myself. Then, I tried to think about her feelings. How did she normally feel as she spent her days in this room?

Maybe she talked to Yamana-san on the phone practically every evening to relieve the loneliness she felt when she was at home.

Maybe being taken in by her dad had given her more financial stability compared to Kurose-san, but her source of emotional support had been her mother. Losing it must've dealt a strong blow to her.

I could feel Runa's breath next to my ear. Her body in my arms was hot. But lust didn't arise in me anymore.

I wanted to protect her—the one girl in my life.

I wanted her to become healthy in both mind and body...

As I held her with those wishes in mind, strength left Runa's hands.

"Runa...?"

When I pulled away and looked her over, I saw that her eyes were closed. Her breathing was calmer than it had been a moment ago.

Runa seemed to have fallen asleep.

The towel on her forehead had slid from its position, so I took it off, cooled it down in the washbowl, and put it on her forehead again.

The ice in the washbowl was gone, so I was about to leave the room to replenish it.

"Ryuto..."

My legs stopped when I heard Runa's voice.

"Don't go, Ryuto..."

I turned around and smiled at her. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm still here."

She didn't reply, however. Her eyes were still closed too.

"Was she talking in her sleep...?"

If so, the thought that I'd appeared in Runa's dream made me happy.

The evening hours of Christmas Eve slowly wore on.

Feeling a soft weight on my back, I opened my eyes. In fact, it was only at that moment that I realized I'd been asleep.

"Oh, did I wake you up?"

Turning to where the voice came from, I saw Runa standing up. I, on the other hand, was lying face down and had a blanket over me.

For a moment, the situation confused me, but then I realized I was in Runa's

room and must've fallen asleep on the floor last night as I'd looked after her. It must've been because I hadn't been getting quite enough sleep because of my cram school studies.

Checking the clock in the room, I saw that it was just before seven. The morning light trickled in through gaps between the curtains.

"Ah, good morning..." I said.

Runa had changed from last night's white dress to the usual hoodie that she wore at home.

"How do you feel? Is it okay for you to be up and about?" I asked.

Runa smiled. "Yeah. Looks like my fever went down. I kinda got hungry, so." She laughed, looking a little embarrassed.

"Oh, right... Sorry I didn't make anything."

"It's okay; I'm the one who should be sorry for not being hospitable. You're hungry too, right?"

It wasn't so bad since I'd just woken up, but I *had* been hungry last night.

"I made a Christmas meal," she said. "Though I thought we'd eat at the restaurant, so it's chicken and cake."

"I see... Thanks."

"Wanna eat now?"

"Huh? In the morning?"

Chicken and cake?

"Is it too much? You don't want it?"

"Nah, I think I could go for some."

Runa smiled happily at my reply. "Hooray! Let's eat, let's eat!"

We went down to the first floor and I saw that the living room was just as we'd left it the night before. It appeared Runa's father really hadn't come home.

Runa had prepared a whole roasted chicken and a Yule log Christmas cake. Apparently, she'd made it with a store-bought Swiss roll as a base and followed a video. You could tell from the way it was frosted that it had been made by an amateur—that, too, I found endearing.

“Well, let's dig in!” exclaimed Runa.

We brought the food to her room and thus began our private Christmas dinner at half past seven in the morning.

Runa pulled the thermometer out through the neck of her hoodie and put it on the table. “Oh, my temperature's 37.5. I thought it went down much more than that...” she said.

I'd given the thermometer to her earlier, asking her to take her temperature just in case, and she'd had it in her armpit since then.

“Don't force yourself. You should rest for today,” I said.

“Yeah... I was gonna meet up with Nicole and some other girls, but I'll call that off.” Runa promptly took out her phone and started swiping rapidly at its screen. “Hey, this chicken doesn't taste like much. Sorry... Want some salt?”

Seeing Runa about to get up, I shook my head. “Nah, I'm good.”

It appeared the chicken really *was* unevenly seasoned. We ate it while looking for parts that were more flavorful than not.

“If you say so. Oh, right! Here's your Christmas present!”

Runa opened the bag she'd had the day before, took something out of it, and gave it to me. It was a green gift wrap with a red ribbon.

“Open it, open it!”

“O-Okay... Thanks.”

I opened the present and there were many paper bags inside. And as I took them out...

“Good-luck charms??”

What came out were omamori—good-luck charms often sold at shrines. Some of them were for academic success, but there were also ones for good

health, avoiding misfortune, traffic safety, and more.

“Yeah. At first, I was gonna only buy ones for studying, but Nicole was like, ‘Isn’t he gonna get worn out if all he ever does is study?’ So I got anxious and started to worry about lots of other things.” Runa laughed awkwardly.

Upon closer inspection, the charms differed in more than just type. They had a variety of different shrine names written on them.

“Wait, you didn’t go around multiple shrines, did you?” I asked.

“Huh? Yeah, I did... The Three Great Tenjin Shrines of Kanto or something? That came up when I looked up amulets for studying.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Yeah. I figured I might as well do the full round, so I went around with Nicole yesterday.”

“I see... Where’s this Tani...Ho...Tenman-gū?”

“Oh, that one’s read ‘Yabo Tenman-gū,’ apparently. Um, I took the Keiō Line from Shinjuku and had to transfer at one point, I think.”

“Huh? Isn’t that really far?” I asked. “So you went to three different places before the restaurant, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And in the morning? Wasn’t it cold?”

“Ah, yeah... I didn’t think about that too much. It was warm the day before...” Runa smiled awkwardly.

Shrines were generally outdoors, and considering Runa’s getup yesterday, she must’ve been cold as she went from shrine to shrine. Was that why she’d suddenly gotten a fever...? The thought of it made me feel guilty.

“You know how you’re working real hard on your studies recently? This sorta stuff is all I can do for you, so...”

“Thank you, Runa.”

Her feelings made me happy and filled me with emotion.

“I’ll wear them all. I’ve got a year until my college entrance exams, so I need a lot of protection.”

Runa smiled and giggled, her cheeks turning rosy.

“I have a present for you too,” I added.

“Huh?!”

I thought it was natural to prepare a present for your loved one that you see on Christmas, but Runa opened her eyes wide in apparent surprise.

“No way?! What could it be?!”

“I’ll go get it. Wait here for a moment?”

With that, I took my bag and left the room.

I entered the room again. “Merry Christmaaas!!!” I called out, my voice uncharacteristically cheerful.

Runa was blinking in surprise as she looked at me.

Crap. Did this bomb...?

I was wearing a red hat, a red coat, a white beard, and then glasses on my face. These were parts of an extremely simple Santa costume, each procured at a hundred-yen store.

“Santa would come to our house and give us presents. I was so happy about it.”

“It was my dad, though. Santa.”

Runa liked surprises, and I wanted to recreate a Christmas memory from her childhood that she’d told me about.

When I’d bought this stuff, I hadn’t imagined that yesterday’s dinner party would go the way it had. Now, I worried that making Runa recall memories of her dad would have the opposite effect... Runa’s lack of reaction gave me a fright.

“Um... This is my present...” I said, now handing her the wrapped-up gift I had in my hand. But as I wet my dry lips, about to say something else to try and fix

this situation...

“Heh heh...”

Runa laughed. And as she did, a tear trickled down her face.

“Huh?! R-Runa...?”

Flustered, I looked at her face and saw large teardrops falling from her other eye as well.

“Heh heh... I know it’s you, Ryuto. It’s obvious because your socks are the same...”

Runa pointed at my feet and smiled. My socks were hardly the only thing I hadn’t changed—my pants were the same too. What I was wearing hardly qualified as a disguise, but Runa laughed happily as she cried, so I laughed too.

“Hah hah... Guess I made the same mistake as your dad...”

The moment I said that, tears began to rapidly stream from Runa’s eyes. I grew flustered—maybe the subject of her dad was taboo.

“S-Sorry...” I said in a hurry.

Runa shook her head, tears still in her eyes. “It’s okay, don’t worry. My Santa isn’t Dad anymore.” Saying that and smiling, Runa suddenly leaned against me.

As I stood there startled by her sudden embrace, Runa spoke softly into my ear. “I realize now that the one who gives me happiness...is you, Ryuto.”

“Runa...”

Her wavy hair tickled the tip of my nose, and my heart wouldn’t stop pounding.

Slowly pulling away from me, Runa looked at me a bit bashfully with her upturned eyes.

“Hey, can I open the present?” she asked.

“Y-Yeah, of course...”

She looked at the present again, then carefully opened the gift wrap.

“Ah, earrings!”

“Yeah. That ring you have—moonstone, was it? These have the same stone.”

“Really?! Wow, you’re right!”

Runa looked at the ring on her right ring finger and then at the earrings, alternating between the two. Ever since I’d given her that ring at the summer festival, she’d worn it every time I’d seen her outside of school.

The earrings I’d just given her had the same design—each had a shiny white natural rock held in a golden piece of metal. They weren’t from the same seller since I’d bought them online, but I thought I’d done a good job finding something that looked similar enough to match.

“You probably have a lot of earrings already... Sorry I couldn’t think of anything else,” I said.

Runa shook her head. “No, I’m happy! Having a lot of pairs doesn’t stop me from buying more,” she said. “And besides... It makes me really really happy that it’s something you chose and bought for me.” Her cheeks became a little rosy and she gazed at me with a smile. “Thank you, Ryuto... I’ll put them on now.”

With that, Runa began removing the earrings she was wearing. Then, she put a moonstone one on each ear.

She swept her hair to one side in the process, revealing the fair, slender nape of her neck. Its beauty and sexiness had me captivated all along.

“Done! Whatcha think?” asked Runa, happily showing off her new earrings.

“They suit you really well.”

Several times better than I’d imagined when I’d bought them online, in fact.

“Hooray! Hee hee. I’m gonna wear these all day.”

Runa picked up the earrings she’d taken off and got on her bed. It appeared she wanted to put them on the bedside accessory stand she had above her pillow.

She knelt on the bed and a stuffed toy appeared from under her knee.

“Ah, I stepped on her. Sorry, Chi-chan.”

Chi-chan?

I was surprised to hear the vaguely familiar name.

“That toy...”

As I pointed at it, Runa held up the stuffed animal.

“Oh, this? That’s a cat named Chi-chan. She’s cute, right? I got her from Maria forever ago.”

Runa put the earrings away with one hand and got off the bed, still holding Chi-chan.

Chi-chan was a small stuffed animal of a cat. I couldn’t tell what character it was supposed to be, but its round and cute plastic eyes were adorable.

“Maria was good at asking for things. I was jealous of that,” Runa suddenly began as she sat on the floor next to the bed. She gazed at Chi-chan. “I always said what I thought right away, so it looks like my parents took my feelings lightly. I could ask for a toy and they’d go like, ‘Yeah, yeah...’ They didn’t really take it seriously.” She then cracked a smile. “Compared to me, though, Maria didn’t talk much. She silently looked at stuff in toy stores too. It seems like adults want to buy things for children like that. Our aunt doted on Maria ever since she was little, so she bought a lot of stuff for her. This cat is one of those things.”

“I see.”

“Still, it didn’t look like Maria actually wanted it all that much. She simply didn’t ask for it because she didn’t want it. So, I took it instead,” she explained.

I’d heard this episode from Kurose-san before, but it was fresh to hear it from Runa’s perspective.

“But at one point, Maria asked to have it back.” Runa’s expression clouded over a little as she said that. “I was really sad. I always thought Chi-chan was super cute, so Maria only had herself to blame for letting her gather dust in a corner of the room. If she was gonna want her back later, she should’ve cherished her from the start. Why did she have to say something like that *after* I started taking good care of her? It was sad, so I got angry and I hit her. Wasn’t

she being unreasonable?” There was a mix of guilt and sorrow on her face.

“It wasn’t like Kurose-san regretted giving Chi-chan away. She started wanting her *because* you cherished her,” I explained.

“Huh?”

“It’s because she likes you. She looked up to you and wanted to get closer to you.”

“Did Maria say that?” Runa’s face went a little stiff.

“Yeah. When she and I were still friends.”

Runa lightly bit her lip and looked down. “I see...” When she next raised her head, her expression was back to being cheerful. “I guess you knew about Chi-chan already.”

“It’s my first time actually seeing her,” I said. “I was surprised—she’s prettier than I imagined. You must’ve been taking good care of her.”

Sure, she had some overall wear, but she didn’t look dirty. I could tell Runa cherished and looked after her.

“Yeah!” said Runa with a smile, holding the toy in her arms.

The sight made a smile appear on my face too. “I’m glad you managed to repair your relationship with Kurose-san,” I said.

“Yeah...”

There was a moment of hesitation in her reply, though, and that concerned me.

“Is something still bothering you?” I asked.

Runa slowly shook her head. “Nah. It’s just...I feel like we might not be completely back to how we used to be after all. It’s like there’s a barrier between us... We barely kept in touch for a whopping six years, so it’s no wonder. I think there’s a lot of things she felt and went through in that time that I don’t know about. And the same goes for her.”

“Makes sense...”

That might’ve been inevitable.

“I hope you can talk things out and fill in the gaps, little by little,” I said.

“Yeah. I really hope so too,” Runa replied with a faint smile. “Even if we can’t all live together again...at the very least, I wanna get along with Maria like we did back in the day.”

I really wished for that too. And for Kurose-san to smile more often.

“I was such an idiot,” Runa suddenly said in self-deprecation. “So what if Christmas Eve was their wedding anniversary? Mom and Dad both moved on long ago.” She held Chi-chan tight enough that her chin sunk into the toy’s head. “This past week, I got carried away, all by myself. Getting all enthusiastic, then failing, then getting depressed... Like, what the hell was I even doing?”

“That’s not...”

Feeling pity for Runa, I looked for a different subject we could talk about.

“Ah...” came from my mouth when I remembered something. “Speaking of anniversaries... Last week was our half-year anniversary, right?”

“Ah...” That noise escaped Runa too as her eyes widened. “You’re right! You’re absolutely right!” she exclaimed as though in disbelief. “Huh? How did I forget about it?! I remembered until our exams began! Man, I wanted to celebrate our half-year anniversary!”

“Well, what can you do? You were busy getting ready for Christmas Eve.”

I’d forgotten about it until now too, what with all the studying in preparation for my winter courses after the tests had finished.

Then, as I looked at Runa while recalling the events of the previous week...

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked, startled and freezing up.

Runa was crying. Her large tears were falling on Chi-chan’s head.

“Runa...? Are you okay?”

Was it so shocking for her that we forgot to celebrate our half-year anniversary? As I grew panicked, Runa shook her head.

“It’s just... I never thought there’d come a day when I’d forget an anniversary with my boyfriend...” Runa buried her face in Chi-chan’s head. “When I realized

that dating you really *has* become a part of my everyday life... I got so happy..."

"Runa..."

What had she felt when she'd reached milestones with her exes?

A month left. A week left... Will I be able to keep dating him until then? Had she counted down the days with those thoughts on her mind?

If so, then perhaps I was able to bring Runa the kind of relief that her exes had never managed to give her. The thought of that seemed to give me strength.

"Okay, then let's celebrate our half-year anniversary now," I suggested.

Runa looked up. "Yeah! Let's do that." A smile appeared on her face as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

There was just a bit of cola left in our glasses. We refilled them and brought them together again for a toast.

"Merry Christmas! Aaand...to our half-year anniversary! Cheers!" Runa's cheerful voice resounded through her castle—her bedroom.

Thus, the first Christmas I spent with Runa came to a peaceful end, along with the slightly bittersweet feelings it had brought.

Chapter 3.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“Seriously...? What can I say... I dunno, I can’t find the words.”

“...”

“Anyway, too bad about the Lisa and Lottie thing.”

“Yeah...”

“Also, are you okay being on the phone? Aren’t you recovering from being sick?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. My fever is down already. I’m just a bit sluggish at the most. Sorry I couldn’t go to the girls’ Christmas party today.”

“Don’t worry about that. And don’t force yourself either. Go to sleep early tonight.”

“Okaaaay! Heh heh. You’re like a mother, Nicole.”

“I get that a lot. From my juniors at the club, for instance.”

“Speaking of mothers, though...”

“Seriously. Who could’ve imagined things would end up like that? After how hard you worked too.”

“Yeah... Still, there was nothing I could do. It’s not like I could force them to get married again if they don’t love each other anymore.”

“Are you okay? You’re not depressed?”

“Nah. I have Ryuto. Maybe I wouldn’t have been able to get over it had I been alone, though...”

“It’s amazing. He looked after you all night yesterday, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And nothing dirty happened? He didn’t do anything weird to you while you

were asleep?”

“Ryuto wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Huh... Is he really a guy? Does he even feel lust?”

“...”

“Runa? Something wrong?”

“I think he does. He said he pushed Maria down in the gym storage room.”

“What?! When did *that* happen?!”

“Before summer break...”

“What the hell?!”

“It’s fine, though, since he stopped himself.”

“But still... Well, if you’re okay with it.”

“...I’m not.”

“Then...”

“I mean, what I’m not okay with is the fact he didn’t try anything on me last night!”

“Huh?”

“Isn’t it weird? Being alone with your beloved girlfriend on Christmas Eve—it’s gotta be weird not to get horny.”

“No, but isn’t that because you were sick? I know it’s weird for me to side with him, but like, it wasn’t really a good time for it, was it? He was focused on nursing you back to health, right?”

“Isn’t that how lust works, though? You’re not supposed to, like, be able to contain it through reason.”

“Well, I think that depends on the person... Maybe he didn’t want to do it that badly, or maybe he was able to hold himself back because he loves you.”

“Hey, which do you think it is in Ryuto’s case?”

“What?! How would I know that better than you?”

“I don’t know! I’ve never talked to Ryuto about stuff like that.”

“By the way, weren’t you avoiding that kinda topic on purpose?”

“So?”

“Cause if you talk about something like that to your boyfriend, you’re gonna get a sexy mood going on. And you don’t wanna have sex yet, right?”

“I dunno! I dunno, but when I think how Ryuto pushed Maria down but didn’t do anything to me even though we spent a whole night together, I get really pissed! And worried if I’m not attractive...”

“...What about that time in Enoshima?”

“Huh?”

“You spent the whole night together there and nothing happened. You weren’t even ill.”

“I guess so...”

“That didn’t bother you?”

“That was... I mean, we’d only been dating for a month at the time...”

“...Say, are you finally starting to feel like doing it?”

“Huh?! A-Am I?”

“Isn’t that what this is about?”

“Eh, I dunno! I just can’t stop myself from thinking about this... Like, what kinda face did Ryuto make when he pushed Maria down...? Even though it makes me jealous and all. I know it’d be better if I didn’t think about it.”

“...Sounds like someone’s in love.”

“Well, sure.”

“You’re *finally* in love.”

“Huh? Whatcha mean?”

“Your relationships never start with romantic love, do they?”

“I guess not... But then what was it?”

“Well... If anything, it’s love for humanity, I guess.”

“Now that sounds kinda fancy!”

“Some guy would say he liked you and you’d do your best to come to like him in return, right? That’s why when they walked away from you, things just ended. Even if you were hurt, you didn’t cling to them and try to stop them.”

“I guess...”

“That’s why it wasn’t romantic love. And now, it finally is—for the first time, with Kashima Ryuto.”

“For the first time... I guess so.”

As Runa uttered those words with flushed cheeks, she awkwardly lowered her eyes to her knees. She held them to her chest as she sat on the bed.

“So even I had a ‘first’ that I could give to Ryuto...”

Chapter 4

The new year began.

In the afternoon on January 1, Runa and I went for our first shrine visit of the year together.

“What a nice view,” I remarked, looking around us after we had fully climbed the stairs to a shrine located high up.

There was a residential area and train tracks with passing trains nearby, but the panoramic view spread far into the distance, offering a pleasant view under a clear winter sky.

This shrine was located close to Station A. Apparently, Runa’s father and grandmother had taken her here a long time ago. It seemed to be popular among locals making their first shrine visit of the year—there was a line of visitors here even in the afternoon.

“Yeah...it is,” Runa replied, not being very talkative at the moment.

She looked cold and had her neck surrounded by her soft white shawl. We kept our linked hands in the pocket of my coat.

She was dressed well and appropriately for New Year’s. The vibrant cool colors of her kimono suited her well—she looked precious enough that I wanted to keep my eyes on her forever.

Contrary to Runa’s outfit, however, her expression was anything but bright.

She hadn’t been very lively since Christmas. Runa seemed to have already completely recovered from her cold, so it didn’t appear to be an issue of her health.

“Apparently, Fukusato-san is coming over tomorrow,” she said.

Fukusato-san was the name of Runa’s father’s future wife. From what I’d been told, she worked at the reception desk at a hospital in Osaka. She’d come to know Runa’s father through a dating app, and they’d been seeing each other

since the summer.

They'd apparently both been traveling between Tokyo and Osaka for a while and only seen each other a few times a month. However, she'd found a job in Tokyo and had moved to this area recently.

"By the way, you know how one day before the sports day, my dad suddenly said he couldn't come? Turns out he was going with his girlfriend to look at the apartment she's renting now. Her real estate agent called her and said that a place that suited her needs opened up, but that she had to decide right away because there were other people who'd be interested in it too. So she asked my dad to come look at it with her since she was coming to Tokyo. It wasn't a business trip."

"So that's how it was..."

I couldn't think of anything better to say.

He was Runa's father, so I didn't want to criticize him, but as Runa's boyfriend, I couldn't help feeling angry at him. How could he act like that when he had a daughter?

Of course, he was unmarried at the moment, so he was free to have a girlfriend and go see her. But should he really prioritize another woman over his high-school-aged daughter's school event that she was excited about?

"I'm not looking forward to tomorrow. I have plans to hang out with Nicole too, but Dad said I have to at least say hello to Fukusato-san before that. And that I have to apologize because my behavior on Christmas Eve shocked her."

"I see."

Was there really a need for Runa to say she was sorry? Maybe so if you considered her father's situation, but I just couldn't wrap my head around it.

"This sucks... Everything sucks. Apparently, she's gonna move in with us in March. She's going to take the room next to mine, the one that used to be my grandpa's study."

"Sorry to hear that."

"It *really* sucks... I wanna get out of that house before that happens. Nicole

offered that I could go to her place, but they only have two rooms and I'd feel bad for her mother. I can't go there for months, you know?" Runa sighed. "Man, I hate it... What should I do? Should I get a part-time job? Can a high schooler even rent an apartment to live alone in?"

"Well..."

I'd never looked into the subject, so I couldn't say for sure, but it'd probably be difficult without getting permission from your parents.

Seeing me stuck for a reply, Runa smiled all of a sudden. "If only I could live with you."

While her tone was joking, I could tell she was half serious.

"Well, why don't we?" I said.

"Huh...?" Her eyes began to wander. "Wait, how would we do that?"

"We could go to some town far away..."

"Where would we live?"

"I guess a hotel would be too expensive..."

In that case, we could go to Runa's great-grandmother Sayo-san's house, where we'd stayed during our summer break. Or maybe *my* grandparents' house... Either way, if we stayed somewhere else and didn't go to school, our parents would be contacted right away. We couldn't live somewhere like that for long.

Since we couldn't rent a whole house or an apartment, that left us with only one option—some kind of boarding house.

And to do that, we would have to make money somehow.

"I'll work," I said. "I can look into day labor or something and we'll manage somehow."

"Wait, but what about school? You've been studying so hard at cram school too..."

Runa was right—I *would* have to give up on high school or trying to get into college.

And besides, I couldn't even imagine what kind of daily employment there was or how to find places that offered it. Even if I got lucky and found myself a job, it might require extreme physical labor, and as I didn't have confidence in my physical strength, I doubted I could make Runa happy that way—Runa, who'd said she wanted to get married and have three kids.

The more I thought about it, the more I could only see it ending in failure, so I was forced to go silent for a moment.

"Sorry... I guess that wasn't realistic," I said.

"It's okay, Ryuto. Your feelings are enough." Runa smiled gently. "I guess it's impossible right now. So when I said I wanted us to live together, that was a joke, heh heh," she said with an awfully cheerful voice. She looked at me warmly as I stood there with a pitiful look on my face.

Being powerless made me depressed. My only source of comfort was that Runa seemed to have recovered her own spirits.

In the meantime, the line of shrine visitors had moved, and before we knew it, we kind of got pushed to the front of the saisen box. Following the nearby adults' example, I bowed twice, clapped twice, and then brought my hands together.

Having finished my prayer, I opened my eyes and saw that Runa still had hers closed as she stood beside me.

We left the line and walked through the shrine grounds, feeling a light sense of liberation.

"What did you pray for?" she asked.

"Well..." I hesitated and wondered if I should tell her or not. "I prayed that you'll have a happy year." I couldn't have chosen anything else after seeing the way she'd been earlier. "So don't worry. If two people prayed for that, that prayer should reach the god here."

Everyone must've prayed for their own sake before others, so since Runa and I had both prayed for her, I figured it would have a bigger impact on the local god of this shrine than anyone else here's prayers.

May nothing ever take this wonderful girl's smile away from her again, I prayed once more inside my mind as though making doubly sure.

"Ryuto..." Runa's eyes glistened as she stared at me. Suddenly, her expression shifted, and she looked as though she was laughing and crying at the same time. "Heh heh, sorry. I guess what you did might've been kinda pointless," she added.

"Huh?"

While I wondered what she meant, she smiled at me.

"I prayed that you'll become happy and that you could take my share too."

"Runa..."

Her words went straight to my heart and I felt warm inside.

What a kind girl. To think that she'd pray for someone else's happiness despite her own difficult situation right now...

"Hey, what happens in cases like this?" asked Runa, looking deeply curious. "Does it mean we'll both become happy?"

Her words made me crack a smile. "Yeah, probably."

We reached out to each other simultaneously and linked our hands before descending the shrine's stairs.

This was supposed to be the time of day graced by the most sun, but the wind hitting my face was cold enough to make my nose hurt.

As we walked along, huddling together and seeking each other's warmth, I had a feeling that the god had already granted Runa's wish.

"Hey, you wanna stop to get something to drink?" she asked once we'd finished going down the stairs. We had been heading in the direction of her house for no particular reason.

"Sure, but... Is that okay? Aren't your dad and grandma home right now?"

"Yeah... That's why I want to." Runa hung her head with a stiff expression. "I don't wanna be near Dad right now... He'd totally start talking about tomorrow."

“Right...”

I understood how she felt, so we went to a chain café in front of the station.

“Haaah... Man, I *really* don’t wanna go home,” said Runa, having a sip of her drink. “Will I have to feel this way every day in March and beyond...? It’s *my* home...”

“You haven’t had a proper talk with Fukusato-san yet, right? Maybe she’s a good person...”

“No way,” Runa immediately replied. “I mean, if Dad marries her, she’ll be my new ‘Mom,’ right? The only one I need is the one I already have...”

She shook her mug with both hands as if to melt the caramel layer of her macchiato.

The heat was on in this café and it was relaxingly warm, but Runa’s expression remained stiff.

“I can’t accept it. How can I accept that my father is sleeping with some woman who has nothing to do with me whatsoever, under the same roof...?” She stopped moving her cup around. “I don’t wanna think about it... It’s disgusting,” she said, as though spitting those words out.

Recently, I’d gradually noticed that Runa wasn’t just a mature, understanding “good girl.” Perhaps the things she accepted on a daily basis with a smile on her face actually just didn’t matter to her.

But when it came to things she couldn’t concede, like the Lisa and Lottie thing, I saw how stubborn, obstinate, and selfish she was.

She wasn’t just bright like the sun. There was a shade to her too, like the moon. She had a kanji for “moon” in her name, after all.

Runa wasn’t a “good girl” nor an adult. She was just an ordinary seventeen-year-old girl that one could find anywhere.

And this ordinary girl was now sighing in front of me.

“If only I could live with you.”

The words she’d said to me earlier played on repeat in my head. At the same

time, that same feeling of powerlessness I'd felt earlier came over me again. Runa was going through so much trouble—was praying to gods really the only thing I could do for her?

If only I were an adult...

If I were earning money and being self-reliant, I could openly invite her to come live with me.

With the way I was now, though, there was nothing I could do. If two high schoolers high on emotions ran away together, they couldn't make it last—that much was clear.

So what could I do?

I had to think about it.

If I couldn't give Runa a place where she would be comfortable, I had to protect the one she was in now. What could I do to that end...?

"Runa, can I stop by your house for a bit?" I asked.

"Huh?" Surprise appeared on her face. "But my dad and grandma are home."

"I know. I feel bad dropping in on them on New Year's, but I want to talk to your dad for a moment."

I didn't know if a guy like me could convince her father of anything, but there was no other way.

I'd never wanted to be an adult as badly as I did now.

However, I wasn't one. Frustrating as it was, I was far from it.

Children needed adults to protect them. There was no way around it—it was unavoidable. So, instead of recklessly running away with Runa, I wanted to ask her father to protect the place where she could be herself.

This surely was the only thing I could do.

The sounds of a New Year's comedy special on TV permeated the living room of the Shirakawa family home.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” her father asked, giving me a dubious look.

He seemed to have sensed something unusual about me as I sat in the seiza position. I’d refused his invitation to sit at the kotatsu instead.

Runa’s father was wearing a sweatshirt and he had bed head. His current appearance was a stark difference from the one I’d witnessed the other day.

There was what appeared to be osechi foods on a plate atop the kotatsu along with a few cans of beer. I really felt like I was intruding upon someone’s private space at home—it made me shrink out of a sense of guilt.

While Runa’s grandmother had been surprised at my sudden visit on New Year’s, she’d offered me zōni soup and had gone to the kitchen to make some. She was just as cheerful and fashionable as Runa had said, and her abundant gray hair had been dyed purple with a hint of pink.

“Right. So...” My voice nearly trembled as I barely managed to force it out. “I have...a request...”

“A request?”

“W-Well... Runa-san is terribly shocked that in March, she’ll have to live with your future spouse... Um, uhh, I was hoping there might be a way you could wait...” I said timidly, keeping my eyes down all the while.

Runa’s father shook his head in apparent exasperation. “I’ve already talked to Runa about that.”

I felt like his eyes were saying, “Did you really come here to talk about something like that?” as though he was amazed at my behavior.

Runa sat in a seiza position behind me, just like I was.

Giving her a glance, her father continued. “I have my own life. Family members are individuals too. We have to respect each other’s freedom, even if we live together. That’s exactly why I’ve given quite a lot of freedom to Runa all this time. She’s already seventeen. She’s an adult, so I need her to be understanding on this.”

His words irritated me. This was the third time I’d felt the humiliating

frustration I'd experienced at the shrine earlier.

"High school students are not adults..." I said.

I'd used to think I wanted to become an adult to catch up to Runa as soon as I could. But neither of us was an adult yet.

Being a high school student is a warped existence. We practically look like adults, our hobbies and ideas are clear-cut, we can think for ourselves, and we can do almost everything adults can do, which makes us feel like we're adults too.

But we can't live alone. Because we still don't have a way of earning a living.

It's frustrating, irritating, and there's nothing we can do about it—high school students are still children.

And adults have a duty to protect children.

"It's the role of an adult to create a place where a child can live and have peace of mind every day," I continued.

We can't live without that.

"Please... Don't turn this house into a place where Runa-san can't be herself anymore..." I said.

I could tell by the rustling of clothes that Runa behind me was lowering her head, just like I was.

"That's easier said than done..." replied her father after a brief silence. "I have my circumstances too. I didn't want to say this to my daughter, but..."

When I raised my head, I saw that Runa's father had an awkward expression on his face.

"My girlfriend has gynecological troubles... A chronic disease in her womb, to be specific. She's already thirty-seven, it's her first time marrying, and she wants children. Natural conception might be difficult, so we're planning to start fertility treatments." Lightly scratching his head, her father continued in a subdued tone. "We've already spoken to a doctor, and apparently active treatments can only be done with a spouse. That's why we have to get married quickly."

Her father kept averting his eyes, and I too felt like I shouldn't look at him directly. Instead, I directed my eyes at the floor and walls.

"It's not like we've abandoned all hope of natural conception either... With all that in mind, I want us to live together as soon as we can."

Faced with a string of words too raw for a virgin like me, my eyes wandered all over the place. I couldn't catch what he meant very well. As if that weren't enough, the fact it was my girlfriend's *father* saying all this to me made me nervous, and my heart was pounding wildly out of control. I felt like I really didn't belong here—I wanted to get out right away.

However.

If I accepted his reasoning and backed down here, Runa's situation wouldn't improve.

Runa's father had his circumstances. But what I had on my mind was Runa's happiness. There were things I'd given up before because I put her first. Kurose-san flashed through my mind.

If that was something that even I could do, why couldn't Runa's father do that as someone who was supposed to love his daughter more than anyone?

Taking a deep breath, I began speaking again. "Um... I think you might be going about this the wrong way."

Maybe what I was about to say to him was really rude, but since I'd ended my friendship with Kurose-san, I couldn't leave without saying it.

"I-I know this is rude, but sir... Did you part ways with Runa-san's mother to marry this woman?"

Runa's father had an openly aggrieved look on his face. "Of course not. I only got to know her recently."

Taking advantage of that opening, I pressed on. "Then... Would you have ever formed a relationship with her if you had never cheated on your wife...?"

It felt like this was my first time seeing the face of a grown man who'd gone speechless in front of me.

Before he could retort, I racked my brain for additional convincing arguments.

“Would you mind prioritizing the happiness...of the daughter you already have...over a child who may or may not be born in the future?” I asked.

I felt like I was saying something cruel. If Fukusato-san heard this, she would surely be hurt. But Runa’s father had already done something worse.

“She has already been hurt so many times,” I continued.

I didn’t say *who* had hurt Runa, but surely he would understand regardless. There was no doubt his impression of me was now the worst it could be.

However, I figured I was fine with it. I didn’t like it when people hated me, but if it meant protecting Runa...

That said, when I saw her father still being at a loss for words, I became flustered. I went on in order to smooth things over.

“Oh, uhh...it’s not like Runa-san doesn’t want you to get married. I don’t think she would oppose it if you only registered your marriage. She just wants you to wait a little before you two start living together. At the very least, for just over a year...until Runa-san graduates from high school.”

The father kept hanging his head in silence—I couldn’t tell if what I said had registered with him.

I could hear Runa’s grandmother humming and the sounds of a knife coming from the kitchen. She surely hadn’t the slightest idea of what was going on here in the living room.

The popular comedians cracking jokes on TV looked more like people from a different planet.

There was nothing else I needed to say here and I endured this hellish silence.

Runa’s father suddenly got up. “I think it’s about time you left,” he said. There was unconcealed anger on his face, as one might expect.

“A-As you wish... My apologies for the sudden visit,” I said, staggering to my feet from a seiza position.

I felt pathetic about having failed my attempt at persuasion. All I’d achieved was angering Runa’s father.

When I made eye contact with Runa, however, her eyes were sparkling faintly.

Chapter 4.5: A Long Phone Call Between Runa and Nicole

“So like, Ryuto was real awesome!”

“Seriously? I’m surprised!”

“He gave my dad a good talking-to and it was so manly and cool! My heart still won’t stop pounding! Like, he *totally* won that argument. Ryuto’s so smart—he took all those things that felt kinda off to me, put them into words, and said them to my dad.”

“Huh. Not bad.”

“He was awesome! I was like, my boyfriend’s amazing!”

“Heh heh. Never thought I’d hear you say something like that...”

“Huh?”

“You’re in love, huh.”

“Yeah... I really am! I love Ryuto...”

“So, is it about time?”

“For what?”

“Sex. You haven’t done it yet, right?”

“Ah, yeah... Is this how it feels to want to do it?”

“What...? If you feel like you wanna do it, then that’s it, no?”

“I dunno! It’s never been like this before... My heart beats fast, and even though we’re always together, I wanna be even closer to him... Is that what this is about?!”

“Sheesh, girl. Mind not saying that to someone whose boyfriend’s keeping his distance from her? He didn’t even message me a ‘Happy New Year.’”

“Shoot, sorry, Nicole!”

“It’s fine. I’m getting popular with another guy, anyway.”

“Huh?!”

“Nishina Ren messaged me ‘Happy New Year.’ And he’s like, ‘Dating me this year will bring very good luck!’ What kinda fortune slip is that?”

“No way! Wait, you’ve been talking on LINE with Nishina-kun?!”

“Remember how we made that six-person LINE group when we played airsoft? Looks like that’s where he found my profile.”

“Wow, that’s so proactive of him! It’s really unexpected!”

“Maybe people really do change when they fall in love, huh...”

“Aha ha, you say that like it has nothing to do with you.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Still...you’re right that people change when they fall in love. Even I can’t believe how much my boyfriend makes my heart race.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.”

“I’m sorry I’m the only one gushing about love! You should do it too!”

“Nah, that would only make me feel empty inside.”

“You can talk about Nishina-kun if you want!”

“He’s just a friend.”

“Then is it okay for me to talk about this?! I’m sorry, okay?! Ryuto was super-duper awesome today! Dad couldn’t say anything back at all to him at the end—that was amazing to watch!”

“Uh-huh.”

“I love Ryuto!”

“So, what happened in the end? Is your dad still gonna live with the woman he’s marrying?”

“Well, Dad got angry at the end, but after Ryuto left, he asked me to give him some time to think. Then when night came, he went outside—maybe he went to talk to his girlfriend. Also, he said I didn’t have to see her tomorrow if I was

so against it, so we can hang out all day starting in the morning!”

“Oh, gotcha! Wanna line up for lucky bags at Marukyu?!”

“Sure! I’m super stoked!”

After giving that spirited reply, Runa and Nicole decided where they’d meet up and ended the call. Then, she opened the photo gallery on her phone and gazed at the selfie she’d taken at a torii gate with Ryuto on their way back from their first shrine visit of the year.

“Thank you, Ryuto,” she said, blushing.

Chapter 5

Runa's father delayed having Fukusato-san move in until Runa graduated from high school. Apparently, Fukusato-san had also been worried about suddenly living as part of a family of four and being a stepmother to a girl in high school, so she'd accepted it unexpectedly easily.

"Thank you, Ryuto! It's all thanks to you..." Runa said after telling me the news on a video call. She had tears in her eyes.

And so, the third school term of the year began.

By the time people finally left the holiday mood behind, January had come to an end. Then, February's arrival brought with it a very important event for couples...

Valentine's Day.

Until last year, I'd been mostly indifferent to it as the holiday had nothing to do with me. Even so, some part of me *had* been excited on the day, just in case some miracle happened.

This year was different, however. I could be openly excited.

Runa came over to my seat at school. "Morning! I can't wait for our date on Valentine's!" she said cheerfully on the morning of February 12th.

"Morning. Yeah, same," I replied. I smiled reservedly at her and minded the eyes around us.

We'd be going to Harajuku for our date on Valentine's Day. When Runa had asked me what I wanted to do and I didn't have any good ideas for Valentine's Day, I'd suggested that we eat chocolate, so Runa was going to take me to a café she liked.

The mood in the classroom had been restless since the morning. At first glance, nothing looked different from usual, but as someone who'd experienced

this secret restlessness every year, I knew what was going on.

As for why—Valentine’s Day was on a weekend this year, so today, Friday, was the students’ opportunity to give each other chocolate at school.

And when my group of three introverts gathered for lunch as usual on this makeshift Valentine’s Day, the mood was anything but normal.

“What’s wrong, you two?” I asked the gloomy Icchi and Nisshi. They were sitting at our joined desks and hadn’t even taken their lunch boxes out. “Icchi?”

“Say, did you see KEN’s stream from yesterday?” Icchi asked.

I shook my head. “Nah... I was busy with cram school homework. I was going to watch the recording this weekend.”

“Me neither... I had something to do,” added Nisshi.

At that point, a serious look appeared on Icchi’s face and he clenched his fist he’d had up on the desk.

“It turns out KEN is a graduate of Houo.”

“What?! Really?!” I exclaimed.

Houo University was a famous private university—one of the leading ones in Japan. Any Japanese person had heard of it.

“Is KEN *that* smart?!” Nisshi asked, surprised as well.

“He’s a former pro, a popular YouTuber, *and* he went to a great school...? That’s practically cheating.”

“I know, right? It’s so shocking I can’t even eat.”

The two seemed shocked, but some part of me accepted this revelation more easily. When KEN talked about serious matters in his videos, he often said things that just made sense, and even when he’d screwed around in his normal videos, I’d figured he must’ve been smart.

“Damn... You wanna shoot for Houo University too?”

“Yeah, like *that* could ever be possible... People from our school can’t reasonably expect to go anywhere higher than a C-tier college.”

“Yeah...”

The two sighed and had dark looks on their faces. It was almost like they felt betrayed by KEN—someone who they’d thought had only been playing games and doing nothing else.

Then, a question appeared in my mind. “By the way, Nisshi, why did you look so depressed earlier?” I asked.

Like me, he hadn’t watched KEN’s stream, so it couldn’t have been the same reason as with Icchi.

“Oh...” Nisshi started to fidget all of a sudden. “I made a little something yesterday, you see... I’ve been wondering if I should give it to somebody or not.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Give? To who?”

Icchi and I both knit our brows at his vague reply.

Averting his eyes from us, Nisshi spoke awkwardly. “Well, it’s chocolate...”

“What? Chocolate?”

“*You* made chocolate? Why? Is it for us?”

Icchi had a blank look on his face, but I was catching on.

“Is it...for Yamana-san?” I asked.

Visibly alarmed, Nisshi turned to look behind him. “Shh!”

Yamana-san was indeed behind him, eating lunch with Runa, Tanikita-san, and some other girls. They had a lively conversation going on and it didn’t seem like they could hear us.

“You, a guy, made chocolate for the demon gyaru? You even made it yourself, huh. That’s hella diligent, man,” Icchi said in apparent admiration.

I couldn’t tell to what extent he’d noticed that Nisshi was in love for real. Icchi had always been a bit ignorant of people’s feelings, but ever since he’d become an active Kid, he had seemed to have grown even more detached from the real world.

When Icchi later went to the bathroom, Nisshi spoke to me as though he didn't think he could count on our friend.

"Hey, Kasshi, would you mind coming with me when I give her the chocolate?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"I'd get too nervous alone... Please."

"O-Okay..."

First, it had been Icchi with his confession to Tanikita-san, and now this. Why did these two want me to keep them company when approaching the girls they liked?

That said, I was kinda happy to have a friend rely on me, so I agreed to go with him and see how his tradition-breaking chocolate-giving would go.

School was over before we knew it.

Runa and I had arranged to leave together, so I didn't have much time to spare.

Icchi was on class duty, so while he had to fill out the class journal, I took the opportunity to quickly leave the classroom and meet up with Nisshi in the hallway.

"I just messaged her on LINE to come out here," Nisshi said. There was a nervous look on his face.

Soon after, Yamana-san came into the hallway, alone. She seemed to have done so after reading the message as she headed straight for us the moment she saw Nisshi.

I sneaked far enough away from Nisshi that I wouldn't hear their conversation.

After they said a couple of words to each other, Nisshi held out what he had in his hand—a small wrapped object. It must've been the chocolate. Yamana-san looked at him and said something, sounding dubious, but she accepted the

gift. Then, it looked like she thanked him, at which point she went back to the classroom with the chocolate in hand.

She'd accepted it, at least. And as I felt glad for Nisshi...

I thought I saw familiar silhouettes appear in the corner of my vision. Looking over, I spotted Kurose-san and Tanikita-san.

Ever since the day it had become public knowledge that Runa and Kurose-san were twins, the former had been dragging the latter around. Kurose-san started to join the group of sunny girls. She'd grown close particularly quickly with Tanikita-san as they both had geeky hobbies and were in the same group for our upcoming school trip. These days, I frequently saw Kurose-san talk to Tanikita-san with a smile on her face during breaks.

Right now, however, the two were clearly hiding—they were tucked into a space between some pillars in the hallway as they chatted. Was it about something they couldn't discuss in the classroom...?

As that thought passed through my head, Tanikita-san pushed the paper bag in her hands at Kurose-san.

"It's a matter of life and death! Please!"

I could only hear Tanikita-san's voice. She now had her palms together in front of her face as if she were praying.

"You're the only one I can ask to do this, Mia! Nikki and Runy would definitely make fun of me... So please!"

Kurose-san accepted the paper bag, looking like she'd had no other choice. While her face said she was in a bind, she nodded timidly, perhaps overwhelmed by Tanikita-san's desperation.

Tanikita-san's expression became cheerful. "Thanks! Okay, good luck!" she said, and swiftly left.

And as I looked on from a distance, wondering just what she'd asked Kurose-san for...

Kurose-san looked around, and our eyes met all of a sudden. I averted mine in a hurry, but for whatever reason, she walked toward me. I turned around to

leave, feeling awkward.

However, I heard her voice. “Kashima-kun...” She sounded like she was at a loss.

“Wh-What is it?” I asked.

This was our first time talking in private since the night I’d put an end to our friendship. When doing group study during integrated studies periods, we only talked if necessary.

Kurose-san looked around, her expression utterly perplexed. “Come with me for a moment,” she said, taking my hand and starting to walk away.

“Huh? Wh-What...?”

“Just come. Please!”

She was being uncharacteristically pushy. Kurose-san opened the door of an empty classroom, and I saw Nisshi in the distance, looking confused as he witnessed me being taken away.

“K-Kurose-san? Um...”

“It’s not what you think,” she said. “I want you to give this to Ijichi-kun.”

With those words, Kurose-san gave me the paper bag she’d received from Tanikita-san just moments ago. There was a box inside with a bright red heart drawn on it. Given the time of year, anyone could tell at a glance it was the kind of chocolate that would be given out of genuine sentiment.



“Akari wants to give this chocolate to Ijichi-kun,” she said. “But she absolutely doesn’t want him to know it’s from her. It’s too big to fit into his shoe cubby, so she asked me to give it to him. I’ve never spoken to him, though, so would you mind giving it to him for me?”

“Huh? Oh...”

So that’s what this is about.

“Okay. I’ll give it to him,” I replied.

Icchi sure is going to be surprised. There’s no way he’ll think it’s from Tanikita-san.

It was fun to imagine his reaction, and I was about to accept the paper bag, but suddenly, the door of the classroom slammed open. Appearing in the doorway was...

“Runa!” Kurose-san and I both called out in surprise.

“I asked Nishina-kun if he saw Ryuto and he said you were in here...” Runa said, knitting her brows. “What are you up to?”

“Huh? W-Well...”

I wondered if it was okay to tell Runa that this chocolate was from Tanikita-san for Icchi, and Kurose-san was probably thinking the same. We exchanged glances in silence.

“That’s chocolate, right?” asked Runa. And when she saw the way we were acting, her expression grew even more stern.

At that point, I realized she was misunderstanding the situation.

“Oh, uh, this is...” began Kurose-san.

Which was when...

SLAP!

A sharp sound rang out in the classroom where we were the only people present.

For a moment, I couldn't tell what had happened.

Runa's shoulders moved up and down as she breathed, standing in a pose that indicated she'd just swung her right hand down.

Kurose-san stood there in a daze, looking down and to the side. Her left cheek had turned red.

I put the pieces together: Runa had slapped Kurose-san's cheek.

This had also made Kurose-san drop the paper bag onto the floor.

"Why do you do things like this? Stop trying to seduce Ryuto any more than you already have," said Runa, her eyes on the paper bag. Her face looked angrier than I'd ever seen it before.

I recalled what Kurose-san had said previously.

"It's not often Runa gets mad at friends or the like, but at times when she did and I saw it, she was really scary."

Standing in front of me now, Runa had laid her anger bare as she confronted Kurose-san.

"Ryuto is *my* boyfriend! I'm *not* gonna give him to you!" Runa shouted, tears welling up in her eyes. "You're always like this, Maria. It was the same with Chichan." Biting her lip in frustration, she stared at Kurose-san. "Why? You already have so much. Stop taking even more things from me."

Kurose-san frowned as though Runa's words had hit a nerve. "Huh? What're you talking about? *You're* the one who has many things." Words began to pour from her lips as though a dam inside her had burst. It was like she was giving tit for tat. "You're popular, and you have a lot of friends. Our dad too... Everyone loves you, and that's why Dad chose you. If I'd been born like you, he might've loved me too. But you go through life acting like it's only natural to have all the things you have—it really pisses me off! Do you have any idea how badly I wanted to be like you?"

"What...?"

"You've always been like this," Kurose-san continued. "Just because people love you the way you are, you don't bother to think about the feelings of those

you can't deal with unless you force yourself, do you? At a glance, you look innocent and openhearted, but in reality, you're pushy. Even the moon-and-star earring you gave me has a theme that's completely *you*. You really love yourself, don't you?"

Runa didn't reply right away. Knitting her brows a little, she seemed hurt as she looked at Kurose-san. It was no wonder—the sister she'd been apart from for years had just told her so much about how she truly felt.

After some time, Runa spoke up again. "Did you ever ask Mom why we ended up living like this? Meaning you with Mom and me with Dad." Her face said she had mixed feelings.

"Of course I have. She said it was something they decided on after taking everything into consideration. It's what adults always say when they can't tell you the truth," Kurose-san replied, as though spitting that out.

Runa gazed at her with the eyes of someone who had something to say. "Dad told me why we ended up this way," she calmly began. "Apparently, Mom wanted to take both of us. But she didn't work at the time, and Grandma was busy looking after Grandpa at their home. She didn't think she could raise both of us just on child support from Dad, so she decided to choose just one."

Kurose-san stared at the floor as she listened.

"It wasn't that Dad chose me. It was that Mom chose you," finished Runa.

"Huh...?" Kurose-san's eyelashes trembled as she looked at her sister.

"‘She's easily hurt and often can't be honest with how she feels, so as her mother, I should be by her side and pick up on her feelings.’ That was what she said to Dad. *That's* how they decided."

Kurose-san covered her mouth with both hands. "No way..."

Runa continued in a clear tone. "Did you always think Dad didn't pick you...? Even if you did, you should've been happy you could be with Mom. People have to make choices. You can't have it all. Even I had to give up on some things. But I got other things in return."

She must've had her mother in mind, as well as her dream to live together

with the whole family again. I was happy to think that, just maybe, I was included in those “other things in return.”

“You know how back when we lived together, we both loved Mom and Dad equally?” Runa’s eyes were directed at Kurose-san and had grown more gentle. “Mom disappeared from my side and Dad disappeared from yours. Don’t you think that’s why we feel the one we lost is so important, and why we love them so much? At the very least, there was a time like that for me.”

Kurose-san remained silent.

“Do you still hate Mom?” Runa asked, her expression suddenly turning serious. “If you do, can you give her to me?”

Kurose-san looked startled by her question. “No,” she replied, shaking her head. “You have Dad. That’s why I can’t give you Mom.”

For a brief while, Runa gazed at Kurose-san with a serious look. “Okay. Then let’s keep on living as we are—me with Dad, and you with Mom.” Then, she smiled.

“Even I want to treasure what I’ve been given,” replied Kurose-san, looking down. She was speaking haltingly and awkwardly. “I’ve finally started to think that way recently... So I wasn’t trying to take Kashima-kun from you either.”

“Huh? But...”

Kurose-san pointed at the paper bag on the floor. “Does this look like chocolate from me to Kashima-kun?”

“What...?”

At that point, I looked more closely at the paper bag and noticed something.

The cover of the box inside had opened from the impact of the fall. Inside the box was a massive heart-shaped chocolate. “Yusuke’s the best ≡” was written on it in white and pink chocolate ink.

It was unquestionably the kind of embarrassing chocolate that strongly reminded you of the handheld fans used by idol admirers. It was easy to sense Tanikita-san’s feelings from it.

Runa looked astonished once she saw it too. “No way...!” she exclaimed.

“I was only asking him to give Ijichi-kun this chocolate that my friend gave to me to pass along.”

As Kurose-san explained things in a matter-of-fact tone, Runa quickly grew pale.

“Um... S-Sorry, Maria...”

Then suddenly...

SLAP!

Kurose-san slapped Runa’s cheek.

“You idiot! Stop jumping to conclusions!” she shouted, glaring at Runa.

But as I got startled by the touch-and-go situation...

Kurose-san dived into Runa, clinging to her.

As Runa caught her sister, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

I recalled what Runa had said to me on Christmas.

“It’s just...I feel like we might not be completely back to how we used to be after all. It’s like there’s a barrier between us... We barely kept in touch for a whopping six years, so it’s no wonder. I think there’s a lot of things she felt and went through in that time that I don’t know about. And the same goes for her.”



I could practically hear the invisible barrier that had been separating the two of them all this time crumble at last. They had finally managed to go back to being real sisters.

“Hey, Maria, look at this,” said Runa, suddenly taking an item out of her pocket and showing it to her sister. It was the earring with the moon and the star. “This isn’t a star. See these lines here? Didn’t you notice? It’s not a star—it’s a *starfish*.”

Surprised to hear that, I looked toward the earring. I couldn’t tell much from where I was standing, but Kurose-san gazed at it in astonishment.

“Like I said, these don’t have a moon and a star. They have a moon and a starfish,” continued Runa, looking gently at Kurose-san.

The Japanese word for “starfish” contained the kanji for “sea,” just like Kurose-san’s given name did.

“The moon and the sea... That’s *our* theme. That’s why I wanted you to have it.”

When Kurose-san heard her sister’s explanation, tears began to stream from her eyes. As she crouched and began to cry loudly, Runa crouched down too and gently patted her head.

They looked like two very young twin sisters who were great friends and had never been apart from each other for a moment in their whole lives.

The next day was Saturday, and Sekiya-san came by as I studied in the cram school’s study room.

“It’s not often I see you here in the morning,” I said.

Since the start of the year, he had been busy with college entrance exams every weekend from the morning onward.

I wondered if it was clear which college he’d be going to at this point, but Sekiya-san averted his eyes, looking dejected.

“Yeah, well. I originally had today reserved to take the second stage of an entrance exam.”

I didn't know what to say. His being here instead must've meant that he'd failed the first stage of the exams for the college that was holding second-stage exams today.

It didn't look like things were going all that well for him.

At lunch, Sekiya-san and I ate outside together for a change of pace. We went to the same chain ramen family restaurant that we often went to together.

Sekiya-san stirred his ramen bowl with his chopsticks. His noodles were mostly gone by this point. “So, have you decided what college you wanna go to?” he asked, though he didn't look very interested. He was probably just desperate to distract himself from his own exams.

“N-No... I still don't really know what I want to become.”

I'd given it a bit of thought after Sekiya-san had brought up the subject, but I still hadn't decided on anything specific.

“Are you going for humanities or sciences? You should be able to decide if you've at least made that choice.”

“Probably humanities... No idea what department, though.”

“Why not just apply to every humanities department at the college you wanna go to?” he suggested. “And if you manage to get into any of them, you can consider it fate.”

“Huh? B-But if I'm going to college, shouldn't I at least have a clear view of my future and decide based on that...?” I said, recalling Kurose-san's words.

Sekiya-san knit his brows. “You take things too seriously. Your parents are gonna pay your tuition regardless of your major or what college you go to, right? What's the point in giving it so much thought?”

“Why did *you* decide to study medicine, Sekiya-san?”

He lowered his eyes. “My dad's a doctor.”

“What...?!”

“He’s an ENT, working near our home. It’s a small office, but he seems to want to pass it on to his children. My sister has no interest in becoming a doctor at all, so ever since I was young, it’s been kinda decided on its own that I’d be inheriting it.”

So he’s the son of a doctor, huh...

It now made slightly more sense that despite him being a ronin who had to pay high tuition for cram school, he didn’t seem to be all that short on money.

“Wow, Sekiya-san...”

“Well, I guess I might’ve hit the jackpot with the family I was born into. Though I wonder what my dad thinks of me...” His expression was dark, perhaps due to the fact his college entrance exams weren’t going well. “You know, I failed my middle school entrance exams too. All three of my top choices. Dad said I might as well go to a public school instead of a private one that was easy to get into, so I went to a local one.”

That must’ve been the “North Central” one where he’d met Yamana-san.

“I’m not all that smart to begin with. I wasn’t an honors student in primary school either. I only managed to get into a decent high school because I did well in my club at middle school.”

And I already knew the rest of the story.

“I don’t wanna disappoint my dad anymore, and that’s why I’m trying my best...but I dunno if I can really get in anywhere,” he said with a dejected look on his face.

“Sekiya-san...” I couldn’t say anything irresponsible to him here as the only entrance exams I’d ever taken were for high school. “I envy you, though. You have something you want to become so badly that you’re devoting yourself so much to studying,” I said, trying to approach the subject from a different angle.

Sekiya-san smiled a little at that. “Well, it’s not so much me wanting to be a doctor as it’s simply wanting to take over the family business since we have one. If my dad was CEO of a company, I might’ve wanted to take over that

instead.”

“Eh...?”

“Aren’t things easier that way? There are countless professions out there. How’s a kid who’s never worked once in his life supposed to find his calling before he’s become a member of society? Why not just do *something* first, and if it doesn’t suit you, look for a different path? People live for a long time in this day and age, you know.”

I felt like what he said was reasonable, but I was still hanging my head, unsatisfied with the idea.

“I get why you wanna be careful about this,” he said. “You’re the serious type and all. But I think it’s fine to not care so much. Like, you could aim to become a doctor because your dad is one. If you ask me, it’s okay to choose what college you wanna go to that way. You’re not gonna get motivated if you don’t have a goal, right? And you *do* want to go to college, yeah?”

Seeing me nod, Sekiya-san went silent for a bit before he continued.

“Before I became a ronin, I actually couldn’t decide on my future. It was my dream to become a doctor, but thinking about it realistically, I was worried if I’d get accepted into college or not. Plus, I fooled around back then, so I didn’t really manage to prepare for my exams... Had I been working at it since I was in high school, things might’ve been a bit easier for me now, even if I’d still ended up a ronin.”

Then, he looked directly at me sitting across the table from him. “I’m saying that if you *don’t* wanna have such regrets, you should decide quickly. And then set your sights on somewhere a bit hard to get into. You still have a whole year left, so that’s gonna push you past your limits. If I wasn’t trying to become a doctor, I definitely wouldn’t be studying this much.”

Suddenly, a thought occurred to me: what if Sekiya-san was so regretful about this precisely *because* he was having to take college entrance exams almost every day now?

“B-But I don’t know much about different colleges yet...” I replied.

I’d always thought that people decided which school they wanted to go to

after visiting different campuses, gathering materials, comparing different options, and then taking one's vision for their future into consideration. You'd also have to take into account how well you did on mock exams, of course. I was freaking out at the fact that Sekiya-san was close to making me decide on my first-choice college here and now.

"You choose the college you wanna go to based on inspiration. Love's the same way. You don't pick who you get a crush on after thinking things through, right? It's the same with colleges. It's okay to just wanna go there because it has a cool name or your favorite idol goes there. If you set yourself a goal, you'll be able to work hard for it."

The moment I heard that, the name of a certain university flashed through my mind.

"It turns out KEN is a graduate of Houo."

My heart was pounding.

No way... Is it really okay to decide things like this?

Still, if I could get into Houo...

When it came to starting to look for a job, I certainly wouldn't be putting myself at a disadvantage by saying I'd gone to Houo. It wouldn't hurt for the rest of my life, for that matter...

It felt like I could see countless possibilities for the future open up before me in an instant.

Could I really go there...? Roughly five people from my school got into top-level universities every year. Could I be one of those five?

"They say academic history doesn't give much of an advantage these days, though," said Sekiya-san. "Nowadays, even astronauts don't need a degree. But the name of the college you went to? That's a certificate of your efforts. Even a genius who could fully memorize a textbook after reading it once couldn't get into college if he never read the textbooks at all."

There was passion in Sekiya-san's words. Perhaps he'd been rousing himself with this kind of talk all the time.

“With that in mind, don’t you wanna give as good a certificate to your future self as you can with the effort that your current self is able to put in?” he asked. “I’m saying this because I think you’re the kinda guy who *can* put in the effort.”

“You sure are passionate about this, Sekiya-san.” I had to poke fun at him on the spur of the moment. It felt awkward having a conversation with him in such a tone.

“If you go a whole year studying for thirteen hours a day, you end up thinking about a lot of things,” Sekiya-san replied in a similarly joking tone. He then assumed a relaxed expression. “Real talk, though—when I look at you, you make me think of myself in middle school.”

“Back when you listened to sutras...?”

“Wow, so you *really* wanna make fun of me, huh.” After laughing for a bit, Sekiya-san lowered his eyes to the table. “I was upright and awkward... Ever since I finished school and saw what it’s like out here, I break out in a cold sweat when I remember myself from back then... Maybe that’s why I can’t leave you alone.”

Seeing Sekiya-san smile a bit awkwardly, I started feeling kinda bashful too.

“Thank you. What you said was helpful.” I left it at that and bowed lightly.

As it was lunchtime, all the counter seats and tables at this ramen place were occupied. It might have been a family restaurant, but I felt bad about staying here too long. Since we’d finished eating long ago, we drank some water and quickly prepared to leave.

Suddenly...

“Huh?” I said. “That’s...”

Peeking out of Sekiya-san’s bag as it sat on the chair was what clearly looked like a present. Judging by its size and the dark-brown paper it was wrapped in...there was surely chocolate inside. I couldn’t tell from the outside if it was store-bought or handmade.

“Did you get that for Valentine’s Day?” I asked.

That’s a popular guy for you, huh... He even gets chocolate at cram school...

Amid my astonishment, Sekiya-san looked at the chocolate. “Yeah, I got it from Yamana this morning,” he said nonchalantly.

“What?! You met up with her?!”

“It looks like she waited for me at the station. As I passed through, she walked up to me coming from the other direction and gave it to me without a word as we passed each other. Is she some kinda pusher or what?” Though he had said that, Sekiya-san broke into a smile as he remembered it.

Yamana-san... You wanted to give him chocolate that badly, huh.

“Are you going to get in touch with her?”

“Well, I guess I should at least say thanks,” Sekiya-san replied with a smile, which naturally prompted one from me too.

“I hope you can give Yamana-san good news soon.”

Sekiya-san smiled happily and bashfully—perhaps the words I’d said from the heart had reached him.

“Yeah... I really hope so too,” he said.

I felt bad for Nisshi, but seeing Sekiya-san’s smile now, I couldn’t help but want *him* to make Yamana-san happy after all.

I got to Station K shortly before 10 p.m. on my way back from cram school that day, and I ran into Kurose-san outside it.

“Oh...” I let out in surprise.

She smiled at me. “Are you back on your way from studying?”

“Ah, yeah...”

“I see. So am I. I hadn’t noticed you there.” With that, Kurose-san’s beautiful black hair fluttered as she turned around. “Well, see you.”

“Right... Be careful,” I said, remembering the incident with the molester from the other day.

Kurose-san looked back just a bit with a smile. “Don’t worry. I have a bike today.”

“Oh... Still, be careful.”

It wasn't like riding a bike meant she'd definitely be safe from molesters.

Kurose-san stopped and looked my way again. “Don't worry! I have this.” She pulled out a personal alarm and a small canister from her bag. It must've been a tear gas spray for self-defense. “Mom bought these for me after last time. So don't worry.”

“Okay.”

Seeing her smile, I did as well as I started walking.

“See you,” she said.

“Yeah, see you,” I replied.

Watching her back as she headed to the parking lot out of the corner of my mind, I silently prayed that the rest of her life would be filled with nothing but happiness.

The next day was Sunday, Valentine's Day, and I was in Harajuku with Runa.

“Ijichi-kun was hilarious that time, though! He didn't believe that a girl gave him chocolate at all,” said Runa.

“Yeah, he was like, ‘This is a prank, right? Did you make it, Kasshi?’ Does he think I have nothing better to do?” I replied.

We were talking about Icchi's behavior when I'd given him Tanikita-san's handmade chocolate on Friday.

“Heh heh. That was from Akari, wasn't it?”

“Wh-Who knows...? I sure don't...”

“It can only be her! Nobody else would make that kinda chocolate.” Laughing, Runa took a sip from her chocolate-flavored drink.

We were at a café specializing in chocolate—Runa had said she liked the place. I couldn't even read its name, but it had said “Lindt” in cursive. The interior had a relaxing feel, so the place was really stylish.

This room was located on the second floor. Its windows looked out on the street, and bright early afternoon sunlight shone through them. We'd come here for chocolate desserts after having eaten lunch at a fast-food place not far from Omotesando.

"I wonder if he still thinks it was a prank...?" asked Runa.

"Well, he looked a bit happy at the end. Maybe he was being cautious—like, he wanted to believe it was real, but didn't want to get hurt if we were messing with him."

"Makes sense... I wonder if it was his first time getting chocolate from a girl?" Runa wondered.

"Of course it was. It's my first time too."

When I realized that my words carried the assumption that I was about to receive some, I got embarrassed and ducked my head.

Runa grinned at me. "I'll give some to you, don't worry!"

There was a somewhat small paper bag in her hands. I'd been overwhelmingly curious about it today, even since I'd met up with her at the station, but I'd done my best not to mind it.

"Here you go. Happy Valentine's Day!" she said, giving it to me with a smile.

"Ah, thank you...!"

This was the first time in my life I had received chocolate from a girl out of genuine sentiment. And it was from my beloved girlfriend...

I was deeply moved. *I never thought such a day would come...* I thought to myself.

"Can I open it?" I asked.

"Sure, go ahead!"

Inside the paper bag was a chocolate-colored box with a red ribbon. My hands nearly trembled with emotion as I untied it and opened the lid.

What appeared from the inside was a smallish chocolate cake. It looked sweet, complete with a heart drawn on top with powdered sugar. The sight

made me feel so bashful and happy that I didn't know what to do.

"This looks delicious... Thank you."

"It's a chocolate gateau! Maria taught me how to make it at her place yesterday! Before she had to go to cram school, that is."

"Oh, I see."

"We ate the one we made as a test and it was super delish, so you've got nothing to worry about!" she told me.

"Sure. I'll cherish it as I eat."

I couldn't retie the ribbon as it had been, so I put it on top of the box and put it back into the paper bag. I then excitedly went back to my drink.

The cold chocolate drink I'd bought on Runa's recommendation was pretty and had what looked like melted chocolate drawn on the inside of the cup. It was delicious too, with a strong smell of chocolate.

"So, it's your first time getting chocolate for Valentine's Day, huh..." said Runa all of a sudden, as though reflecting upon the matter while she gazed at her drink. "It's my first time too—giving handmade chocolate to my boyfriend, I mean."

"Really?"

That makes me happy...

As that thought passed through my head, Runa opened her mouth, letting the straw stuck in her drink slip from her lips.

"There were times when I felt like they were hoping for it, but it sounded like too much trouble, and I didn't want to screw it up."

"But you still made something this time," I said with a big, happy smile on my face.

Runa smiled too, gently. "I wanted to, for you. My homemade food always makes you happy."

"It does... Thank you, Runa."

As I expressed my gratitude again, Runa blushed. "You're welcome..."

It was a happy time. If happiness had a smell, it must've smelled like chocolate. At this moment, the air around us was full of sugary-sweet comfort.

Suddenly, Runa started to look restless. "Hey, there's something I wanna ask you..." she said.

"Huh? What is it?"

I really couldn't think of what it could be, or what might be difficult for me to answer, so I looked her in the eye and I wondered what this was about.

Averting her eyes, Runa narrowed her lips and looked a bit awkward. "Do you watch videos for mature people, Ryuto?"

"For mature people?"

"Yeah."

"Uh, I dunno... Are you talking about, like, war films?"

"Ah, no, I mean...erotic ones?"

"E-Erotic? Um, uhh... A-Are you talking about porn?" I asked hesitantly, at which point Runa nodded. "Wh-Why do you ask?"

"Just answer me. Do you? Or no?"

"Huh...?!"

Runa sounded impatient, and I wondered why I had to answer a question like this.

"I-I do," I replied.

Runa's eyes began to sparkle. "What kind?"

"What?!"

I-Is she asking me what genres I watch?

Why is she asking me this, anyway? Does she want to make sure I don't have any deviant interests so she can feel safe in the future?

Either way, my only option was to give a run-of-the-mill reply.

"Stuff with high school girls, I guess...?"

It's normal for guys in high school to watch that sort of thing, right? I'm sure it is, I thought to myself over and over as I gave my answer.

"Uh-huh..." Runa blinked repeatedly. "So you like high school girls?"

"Huh...?" I was taken aback. "Well, I mean, you're one too..."

"What?" But this time, *she* was the one looking confused.

That made me flustered. "Ah, i-it's not like I imagine you when I watch it...!"

"You don't?" Runa looked dejected, which made me panic even more.

"What?! Whaaat?! Um, uhh... Well..."

She still looked downcast as I stammered.

"Maybe I do," I eventually replied after a pause.

Her face brightened up. "For real?"

Wh-What the hell is going on here?!

"Hey, so, do you imagine me in dirty situations?" she asked.

"What?!"

"C'mon, tell me! Do you?!"

"I-I do..."

A lot. So much that I can't tell her.

"You do?! I couldn't tell by looking at you!"

"Whaaat?!"

If anything, I thought it would be weird if a guy walked around with a face that made it obvious that he was thinking about sex all the time.

"Hey, so, what kinda stuff do you imagine?" she asked. "What am I like in your imagination?"

"Huh? Wait, uhh..."

"C'mon, it's fine, tell me!"

"I think that's a bit..."

“C’mon, tell me!”

At that point, we heard a woman at a table next to us clear her throat, which made us stop. Sitting alone with her eyes pointed at her book, she looked irritated.

It appeared that we’d made a bit too much noise. And about something indecent too... It couldn’t have been a worse topic for this café’s atmosphere.

Having reflected on our actions, we picked up our unfinished drinks and left.

The avenue leading up to the nearby shrine was full of people as we stepped outside the café. Runa looked like she could start humming at any moment as she walked along, looking into the windows of fancy stores.

Today she wore a shortish white down coat over a loose-fitting sweater with overly long sleeves. Below that was a tight miniskirt and tall boots. The sweater’s sleeves were particularly cute—the thought that I wouldn’t get to see her like this for much longer made me wistful about the passing of seasons.

“You know, recently I’ve been getting this strong sense of...being free, I guess?” said Runa. Her fresh, clear tone matched the brisk winter air. “It was super shocking when I found out my dad was getting remarried and the ‘Lisa and Lottie’ plan went under...but now, I feel kinda lighthearted. I can put the idea of going back to those days behind me now since I know it won’t happen.”

As we walked down the street amid the crowds, the dry, freezing air lightly brushed against our cheeks.

“Still, it’s not like my family’s gone or anything,” Runa continued. “If I treasure the relationships I have with my dad, my mom, my older sister, and Maria, I’m sure our family bonds will remain. Just like back then.” Runa’s eyes sparkled with a vivid light. “I’ve become free, at last. Free from my desire to return to the past.”

Saying that, Runa raised one hand high—the one that wasn’t holding a drink. The ring on her ring finger reflected the mild sunlight, the white stone glittering together with her earrings. A calm blue sky was just beyond her slim fingers and the branches of the tall Japanese elm trees.

“You can’t go back, not ever. I feel like I’ve finally come to accept that,” Runa added. As she gazed up at the sky, her profile brimmed with her strong will.

A bird cut through the blue expanse above us.

“I won’t look at the distant sky anymore—I’ll never reach it. Instead, I’ll only look ahead of me. I’m not a bird, so I can’t live my life in a way that fits me if I’m attracted to places I can’t go.” Then, Runa looked at me and smiled. Her expression was like the sun in early summer and fit her to a tee. “All right, from now on I’m gonna walk toward the future!” she said cheerfully, picking up the pace.

Although the roadside trees weren’t green in winter, we knew there were countless buds living on their branches.

I was sure that something was changing in a big way inside Runa.

“Maria said she wants to be a manga editor. I need to find a dream for myself too. I’ve gotten a bit of a late start compared to everyone else... Think I can do it?” Runa asked me. She looked a bit worried.

“Of course. It’s you we’re talking about,” I said firmly. “There’s actually something I need to say to you too...”

I hadn’t actually planned to tell her yet, but after seeing her like this, I felt like I had to.

“I’m thinking of aiming for Houo University.”

Runa opened her eyes wide at my confession. “What? Houo? *That* Houo? The place where supersmart people go?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Wow, that’s crazy! Like, seriously!”

Runa’s unexpectedly big reaction made me flinch. “Well, I mean, anyone can *aim* for it... I need to work hard from now on so I can actually get in, though,” I said.

She made a fist and shook it around earnestly. “Of course you’ll get in! You’re really smart.”

“Thank you, Runa.”

When she said that, I started feeling like it really might just happen.

“Let’s do our best together! I’m gonna support you real hard!” Saying that vigorously, Runa looked like something had suddenly occurred to her, and a gentle smile appeared on her face. “Yeah. If it’s for your sake, I can support you from the bottom of my heart,” she said, as though thinking deeply about the matter.

“Thank you, Runa.” Feeling stronger on the inside, I smiled back at Runa. “I’ll support you too.”

At that point, we looked at each other and smiled again.

“It’s like we’re each other’s cheering squad,” said Runa.

“Yeah,” I replied.

I wanted to be her ally, no matter when or where.

The fact that I’d managed to meet someone I could love so strongly and who loved me back was a treasure—the best thing that had ever happened to me.

No matter what future you choose, I’ll support you.

Let us keep smiling together from now on.

Forever.



After that, I kept Runa company as she window-shopped all the way to Shibuya.

Days were still short at this time of year, and the sun had set at some point on our way. Night was setting in.

“Wow, it’s so pretty!” exclaimed Runa upon seeing the decorative lighting at a certain complex we passed. “They’re still doing the lights! Let’s go look for a bit!”

“Sure thing.”

And so, we entered the premises.

There were decorative lights all the way to the center of the path leading to the complex. As we walked, I looked at the atrium below us and saw that the display was even more vibrant there. The plants decorated with resplendent lighting surrounded an open dining area of a restaurant down there. I was used to seeing the whitish LEDs on the streets that seemed to be all the rage these days, so this orange lighting felt like it gave the place a luxurious and nostalgic feel.

“Ah, so pretty! Imagine what it would be like to sit there!” exclaimed Runa, looking down.

The restaurant below us seemed like a high-class French place, so naturally, everyone sitting in the open area seemed to be adults. They all looked calm and composed.

“That must be nice... I wanna go on a date to a place like that one day...” said Runa.

“Yeah. When we become adults...”

When we become adults...

This winter had been bittersweet, forcing me to face the fact I wasn’t yet an adult time and time again.

When, one day, Runa and I became real adults who could eat at a restaurant

like that without losing our nerve...what color would our memories of our current selves be?

I hoped it would be a warm one, just like these decorative lights.

That was another reason I didn't want to have regrets.

"Of course you'll get in! You're really smart."

As I turned Runa's words over in my mind, I could feel strength well up from deep inside me.

"What's this feeling...? I come to Shibuya all the time, and I see lights like these every year..." Runa began, gazing at the lights. Then, she laid her head on my shoulder. "But I feel like these are the prettiest ones I've ever seen," she added with a sentimental look in her eyes before raising her head and looking at me. "I wonder if it's 'cause you're by my side?"

Were her cheeks red because of this numbing cold?

As she gazed at me with upturned eyes, her smile looked sweeter than usual. I loved her white breath in the air and the warmth we exchanged between our linked palms.

I wasn't actually much of a fan of cold weather, but I couldn't help but wish for winter to go on a little longer.

The budding spring season was just around the corner.

Chapter 5.5: Kurose Maria's Diary

Runa came over to make sweets yesterday, probably to practice making a Valentine's Day present for Kashima-kun.

It wasn't like I didn't realize it, but making and eating sweets with Runa was so fun that I didn't really care.

We've finally managed to get back to how we used to be, Runa and I.

I couldn't do anything to make it happen on my own. Runa was the one who opened a new path for us. And the one who gave her a push on the back...was probably Kashima-kun.

I can tell. That must've been the case.

I'll surely envy Runa for the rest of my life. She has things that I don't.

In retrospect, I've looked up to Runa for as long as I can remember. I even looked up to her while I was by her side. Because I loved her. It was natural for us to be that way.

I feel like I got to see myself from those days again. And now I know that even Runa envies me too sometimes.

My life isn't without its own worth. Why did I think I had nothing?

I have a dream. I have my friends from School T. At home, I have Mom, Grandpa, and Grandma.

And I have my sister Runa back.

I've also made new friends—Akari-chan and the other girls.

My life isn't lacking and I'm not alone. It's actually so radiant.



Getting Runa back must've made it so I can notice all that.

It's like she's my wings. When Runa lifted me up and I got a look at myself from above, it turned out I wasn't all that miserable after all.

Thank you, Kashima-kun.

I've finally remembered what happiness feels like.

Epilogue

After that, we returned to Harajuku at Runa's request and headed to a shop with photo sticker booths that Runa often went to.

It was located underground, but it was brighter than daylight inside due to the fluorescent lamps and the light leaking out from the photo booths. The plastic covers that wrapped around the booths bore photos of women who looked as trendy as they came. The sight of the photo booths stretching across the room in a long line was incredible.

Most of the customers were young, ranging from teens to college students. Some booths had long lines of people in front of them. There were couples here and there, but the vast majority of customers here were girls.

I was overwhelmed. It was my first time at a place like this. Had I not been dating Runa, I might've gone my whole life without coming here.

"Which one should we go in...? I guess something more natural that doesn't do too much to how you look is the best choice when you're with your boyfriend..." Runa said as she walked around, evaluating the booths.

I couldn't tell the difference between them at all.

Runa looked like she had an idea. "Okay, let's go with this one!" she said, getting in line at a booth.

Our turn came quickly. First, we had to use the screen's menu on the outside to select a background and the number of people going inside. The countless colors and designs were too much for me to wrap my head around, but Runa promptly chose things on the screen using a stylus.

"That should do it! Let's go, Ryuto!"

"O-Okay..."

With Runa pulling me by the hand, we slipped through the plastic cover and entered the booth. The inside was pure white. As I stood there absentmindedly,

the photo session began right away.

“Strike a pose, Ryuto!”

“Huh?!”

“You can just follow the examples!” she said.

“Okay?!”

Upon closer inspection, I saw some example poses shown on the screen in front of us.

“Move up a bit!” Runa told me.

“Huh?!”

“Wait, that’s too close! You won’t be fully in the frame!”

“Whaaat?!”

“Hurry, hurry!”

While I panicked, the machine began its countdown—“Three, two, one...” was followed by a camera flash.

Then it was time for our next pose.

“C’mon, Ryuto, hold your hand out,” said Runa.

I looked at the screen and saw that, in the example pose, two people each held up a hand in the middle to form a heart.

Th-This is so embarrassing...!

“Ryutoooo, hurryyy!”

It was cramped in the booth, and it was full of Runa’s scent. Standing before me, she was holding out her hand and looking at me with upturned eyes.

“Like this...?” I said, hesitantly holding my hand out too, at which point Runa positioned her fingers securely over mine.

My heart was racing so much that I was worried I might make a weird face.

We went through a similar process several times. By the time we were done taking pictures, I was completely drained in more ways than one.

“Wow...” I said.

Do all girls do stuff like this?

And it's not like they're all models either. I'm surprised they can strike pose after pose like that without getting embarrassed...

As I stood dumbfounded—half impressed, half astonished—Runa was doodling on a screen with the stylus with incredible speed beside me.

“Hey, this bear is so cute! You can have it, Ryuto! I guess I'll go with the cat! Oh, this looks amazing!”

She was talking to herself, and quickly at that. Runa added all kinds of stickers and decorations to our photos. To me, it seemed like she was some new kind of hacker with the way she skillfully used the stylus. And the more I looked at it, it even started to look cool to me.

She's a gyaru, all right... A genuine one... She must have a mountain of photo booth stickers from the past that made her so masterful at this.

And as I stood in awe of Runa's extrovertedness, like I'd once used to...

“All done!” she exclaimed, pushing the button to indicate she was finished.

Thus, the first photo booth stickers I'd ever taken were ready.

“Wow, these are so great! They look so much better!” Runa said excitedly once she saw the printed stickers. “You're cute too, Ryuto!”

I checked them myself. My face looked more handsome in them than it did in the mirror, my lips were tinted red, and my eyes had gotten bigger. It was embarrassing that, overall, I looked more like a girl than a guy.

Runa, on the other hand, was exceptionally cute in the photos. Her expressions and poses matched, and she looked like a perfect beauty that'd been made with computer graphics.

I used to dislike how girls' faces were edited in stickers like these since I thought they looked unnatural, but when a girl who was *actually* cute took pictures of herself like these, I couldn't help but think she was unrealistically cute. Though, of course, I preferred the real Runa.

“These are nice...”

Unable to say anything else, I went quiet after that.

All of a sudden, Runa looked at me with concern. “So, how was it, Ryuto? Your time in that booth didn’t go so smooth? Oh, wait, that kinda rhymes. I should ask Nicole what she thinks about that one.” Smiling a bit, Runa then assumed a serious look again. “You know how I once said, ‘I’m a gyaru, and I wanna do all the things that gyaru do’? I figured you wouldn’t be interested in any of it, though, so I didn’t wanna make you come along too much.” Looking uneasy, Runa pursed her lips for a moment and paused. “But this is me... I actually wanted to go to a photo booth with you sooner...but I thought it wasn’t your thing, so I held back. Was it too much...?”

I recalled what Runa had said to me before the cultural festival.

“You yourself might lose interest in me at some point. I’m a gyaru, and I wanna do all the things that gyaru do.”

So *this* was what gyaru did.

I felt like something deep inside me that had been bothering me just a little had gotten washed away.

“No, it’s okay,” I replied. “It was pretty surprising since it was my first time, but it was kinda fun.”

Runa’s eyes widened. “What? Really?”

“Yeah.”

“So if we see a nice-looking photo booth when we’re on a date, would you join me for couples’ stickers?”

“Sure... If you’re okay with me,” I replied without any confidence.

“Of course I am!” Runa replied, showing me a big smile. “The only couples’ stickers I can make are with you, Ryuto. Now and forever.” With her cheeks reddening a little, Runa gazed bashfully at me. “So I wanna make them with you.”

“Runa...” Moved, I felt an urge to embrace her delicate body. “Yeah... Let’s make a lot together,” I said on an impulse.

Runa brightened up in the face. “Really?! Wanna go take another one now, then?!”

“What?! O-Okay...”

Since I’d just offered to make more, refusing wasn’t an option here.

Runa began to walk around, inspecting the options again. “I wonder what we should go with next... Oh, yeah!” she said, stopping in the center of the shop.

“Hey, Ryuto, do you like cosplay?”

“Huh?”

Looking over, I saw a poster on a nearby wall advertising free cosplay rentals. Apparently, they were lending cosplay outfits to people taking photos in the booths.

“N-Not really... It’s not something I have any special interest in...”

I was cautious in my reply—she might’ve already had me pegged as a pervert after what she’d asked me earlier, so I couldn’t afford to let on any more than I already had.

“Ehh...? Weren’t you into Maria’s cosplay, though?” Runa said, pouting. She didn’t seem pleased with my reaction.

She must’ve been referring to that time Kurose-san had shown me photos of her cosplay during a meeting of the pamphlet subcommittee.

“I wouldn’t call it... I mean, that was just because I knew the character she cosplayed.”

“Really...? Well, I’ll leave it at that, I guess...” said Runa, looking unsatisfied. Then, she seemed to recall something. “Oh! Speaking of Maria, she showed me one of KEN-san’s videos! The one where Ijichi-kun appears.”

“What? Really?”

“It was amazing... There was, like, a castle. You can make that in a game, huh? I guess Ijichi-kun has talent.”

Runa sounded genuinely impressed. I knew full well how amazing Icchi was at building things, but I got a little miffed at her praising him.

“Yeah, well, there’s plenty of Kids who make even crazier stuff,” I said.

Runa gazed at me for a little while and an expression of wonderment appeared on her face. “Oh, are you...getting jealous?”

For some reason, she looked happy.

“Oh, n-no, it’s not like that...!”

I realized my reaction was childish, and belated shame came over me.

But seeing me lose my presence of mind made Runa smile. “Heh heh, now we’re even!”

It didn’t feel quite right to me, but apparently, this was how things were.

“So, what do ya *actually* think? About cosplay,” she asked again.

“Well...”

At this point, I had no choice but to tell the truth. My face grew hot. “It’s not like I’m particularly into cosplay...but I *do* want to see a girl I love in it.”

“You mean...”

“I really want to see you in a costume,” I said shyly.

When she saw me acting this way, Runa’s cheeks grew red too.

“Come *on*... You can’t do that! It’s against the rules!” she said, blushing and sounding a bit angry.

She was really cute like that.

“So, what kinda cosplay do you wanna see me in?” asked Runa.

“Huh? Well...”

We started picking out an outfit for her. After borrowing an album from the staff, we looked through the photos of outfits inside.

“I guess a cop or a nurse would be safe choices? We always wear uniforms too, so...”

“Yeah...”

I was wavering really badly here. Frankly, I wanted to see her in all of them. I

wanted her to wear every single one in the book. I'd never thought I was so passionate about cosplay.

It was probably because it was Runa we were talking about. I really thought she'd look good in any of them.

That said, I had to make a choice. Just one outfit. And if I had to pick one thing I wanted to see Runa the most in...

"Um..." I could tell my ears were getting red from embarrassment.
"This...would be good..."

I pointed at a maid outfit. It was a perfectly standard one—a black mini dress, a frilly white apron, and over-the-knee socks.

Man, I'm such an otaku!

I was aware that this outfit was *the* choice of a virgin otaku. But it was the one I wanted to see the most. No matter what I chose here, she'd suspect I had some fetish, so there was no point in putting on airs and choosing something else.

"Ah, I knew it!" said Runa, her face lighting up. "I *knew* you'd say that!"

"What?!"

"You wanted me to work at a cake shop, yeah? With uniforms that have frilly aprons, right? Aren't those close to maid outfits?"

"Oh..."

I recalled that had been something we'd talked about when we'd just started dating.

"I just thought about how a uniform from a cake shop would suit you," I said.

So I exposed myself that early... It's already far too late, huh.

"I'm surprised you remember that..." I added.

It had been just a small part of a trivial conversation we'd had so long ago.

"I do," said Runa with a smile. "It was my first time getting close to a guy like you and I wondered what kinda person you were. I've been collecting little bits of information about you and holding all of it dear in my head. Like things

you've said or done."

When I saw her happy smile as she spoke with somewhat downcast eyes, emotion filled me once again.

I felt a bit ashamed of my earlier internal conflict. Runa was trying to accept even my virgin otaku fetishes. So did this, perhaps, mean that her questions at the café earlier hadn't been her thinking how perverted I was...but rather her trying to find out more about me?

Still, why was she suddenly gathering information about me concerning sexual matters? I'd barely ever talked to her about that sort of thing before, and while she had a lot more experience than I did, I'd thought she was indifferent to it.

And when I considered what this sudden change in her meant...

My pulse rose. Maybe the convenient place my imagination went to was off the mark, but...

Was it about time? Was it coming soon? Was she...starting to think about having sex with me?

"Okay, I'm gonna go change!" Runa said.

She took the maid outfit she'd borrowed from a member of the staff and disappeared into a fitting room, all smiles. And after a few minutes of me waiting restlessly, the curtain opened and out stepped...

"Ta-dah!"

"Whoa...!"

I unintentionally jumped back. Runa simply looked too precious in a maid outfit.

That chest, which looked like it would burst out of the dress at any moment! That waist, accentuated by the apron strings! That slender but *thick* patch of skin between her top and socks!

And...

"Whatcha think? Does this look good on me?" asked Runa with a smile,

bringing her hand to her head.

Sitting on top of her head was a pair of pink bunny ears.

“I picked this as a head accessory instead of the headband that came with the set! Isn’t it kinda cute?”

Runa then struck a cutesy pose, folding her hands like bunny paws.

I felt like a massive arrow had just pierced my heart and set it aflutter.

“Okay, now let’s go take some pics! ≡”

Wrapping her arm around mine, Runa jauntily led me to a photo booth. And so, I ended up inside one with Runa the bunny maid.

She was cute. Way too cute.

My heart wouldn’t stop pounding as I looked at her reflection on the screen.

This photo session proceeded at the same dizzying speed as the last one.

“Three, two, one...”

As the machine sounded the countdown, Runa called out to me. “Ryuto!”

“Hm?”

With the shutter on my mind, I turned toward Runa...and found her face right next to mine.

Our lips softly touched.

By the time I could freeze in astonishment, our lips had already parted and the shutter had been released.

We’d kissed. Here, in this cramped space with a plastic cover around us. A bunny maid Runa and I...

And that had been captured by the camera.

The thought of it made my heart race.

“R-Runa?”

Although we were done taking photos, Runa wasn't making her way over to the doodle screen. When I called out to her, she smiled in a satisfied way, her face flushed.

"I always wanted to take a kissing photo in one of these."

I loved the bashful expression she was wearing.

Judging by the way she'd said that, this must've been her first time too. The thought of it made joy well up from deep inside me.

"So, Ryuto..."

"Hm?"

Suddenly, Runa moved up close to me. "What do you want this bunny maid to do?" she asked.

"What...?!"

She brought her chest near my eyes. The dress looked just about ready to rip open in that area. It made me call out in discomposure.

Runa gazed at me with upturned eyes, as though to incite my arousal. "Hey, am I sexy like this? Do I turn you on? Does it make you wanna have sex?" she asked provocatively, pushing her cleavage against the middle of my chest.

My heart pounded at the springy, soft sensation, and despite where we were, I felt like I was close to losing my reason.

"Wh-What's with you, Runa?" I asked in a panic. "You're kinda strange today..."

Runa seemed surprised at that and moved away from me a little. "I dunno... Something's weird with me. Even I can tell," she said, lowering her eyes. She looked like she was at a loss. "When I try to talk to Nicole about this, I end up bothering her... My only choice was to ask you."

"Ask me what?"

I couldn't tell what she was driving at.

Lifting her chin in a swift motion, Runa looked at me. "Hey, we agreed we'd share our thoughts with each other, right?"

“Y-Yeah...”

Runa had been the one who’d said it, but I wanted to abide by that too. With that in mind, I prepared myself for whatever was coming.

Then, Runa said something completely unexpected.

“I wanna get you horny... I want you to see me in a horny light. Does this mean I wanna have sex with you?!”

“What?!”

“Hey, what do you think? Do I wanna do it with you?” she asked.

Runa drew near me again, looking at me with worry in her eyes. I was close to panicking.

“I’ve never felt this way before...so I dunno...” she added in a quiet, weak voice.

The photo booth’s doodle time allotment had begun long ago—by now, the timer might’ve already run out and the stickers had been printed out. I was glad there hadn’t been anyone waiting in line behind us.

While those thoughts floated somewhere far in the outer reaches of my mind...

WHAAAAAAAAAAAT?!

If there was such a thing as a contest for the loudest internal thoughts, I was sure I’d be winning it right now.

My heart pounded with incredible speed as I gazed at my bunny maid girlfriend standing before me.

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume 4!

This time, the story spanned late autumn and the winter. I feel like winter memories are bittersweet—is that the same for all of you too?

As I wrote this volume, I recalled a Christmas Eve when I was a high school senior and college entrance exams were right around the corner. I remember going out with friends from my school who went to the same cram school too. We used a break between classes to go into town—it was full of couples. We bought a whole Christmas cake at a convenience store on the spur of the moment and binged on it in our classroom. It was a bittersweet experience at the time, but now that memory only makes me nostalgic.

Irregular things are more likely to stay with us, aren't they? I'm sure that even when Ryuto becomes an adult, he'll look back fondly on the events of this winter.

Speaking of memories, photo booths are a fond one for me. I sometimes write works with gyaru characters (a gyaru appears in *Otakusou no Kusatte Yagaru Ojousama-tachi* [Rotten Ladies of the Otaku Manor]), so I've kind of been keeping a finger on the pulse of photo booth trends. Modern photo booths have changed too much since my day, though. If I were friends with a modern gyaru and she took me to a photo sticker shop, the culture shock might make me lose my nerve even more than Ryuto!

Back in high school, I liked getting stickers from my friends who took them with their boyfriends. I even pestered my friends for them. "You don't have anyone else to give it to, right? Give one to me"—that sort of thing. I had fun watching my friends and their partners—it was kind of like wanting to lovingly watch over a fictional couple. I didn't have a boyfriend myself, but I still put stickers in a sticker book and sometimes looked at them with a smile on my face. Thinking back on it now, though, that was kind of scary...

Taking good care of things and keeping them for a long time is one of the few

things I can boast about. I still have that sticker book from high school. I can show it to people at any time. My friends who once gave me stickers you took with your boyfriends—sleep with one eye open...

And so (totally not changing the topic), we've hit volume 4 already. It's all thanks to all my readers that this story has been able to go on for so long.

Back when volume 1 came out, I had already planned out some parts of the story that unfolded between Runa and Maria in the third and fourth volumes. Before the release of volume 2, however, I couldn't be sure the series would be able to continue, so at that time, I focused on advancing the relationship between Runa and Ryuto. As a result, I ended up writing Maria as a feeler character who was only there to test the main couple. That's been bothering me.

Maria showed up in the story as somebody who was necessary to advance Ryuto and Runa's tale, so I'm really glad I managed to give the sisters' story a proper ending.

The love stories of the supporting cast have turned upside down since the previous volume too. They're now even more exciting to follow, aren't they? (I like to put pressure on myself.)

As always, I can never sufficiently express my gratitude to my illustrator, magako-sama, who makes such beautiful illustrations! Thank you so much for drawing Icchi's before-and-after when I knew asking for both was unreasonable!

To my editor, Matsubayashi-sama—I'm always so grateful for how incredibly helpful you are! I feel like I'm the yokai Konaki-jiji and you're carrying me on your back and cradling me in your arms. I'm able to focus on writing light novels thanks to you.

Also, as I've previously mentioned in *Dragon Magazine* and some other places, this series, unbelievably, will be made into a manga! It's planned to start coming out on February 23, which is four days after this book goes on sale in Japan. Please check it out on Gangan Online!

And finally, as you've probably already realized after reading this volume and getting to this part of the afterword, this series will thankfully continue for a fifth volume.

In what's been published so far, Ryuto and Runa's story spans summer, autumn, and winter. It will finally be spring in the next one and the seasons will have come full circle. Please look forward to seeing where the main couple's love is headed as they enter their final year of high school, along with the youth of their friends surrounding them!

Well then, may we meet again in the next volume!

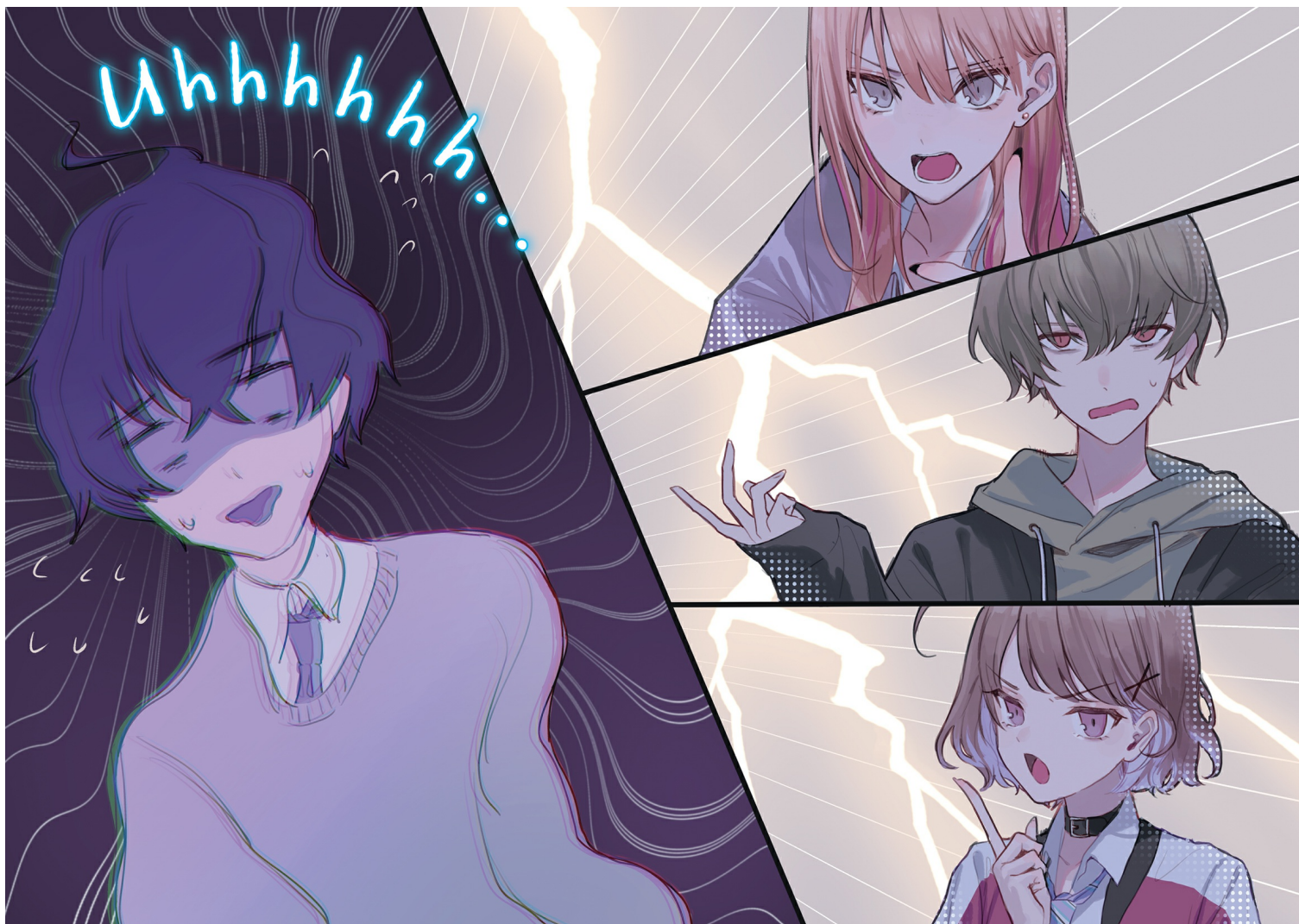
January 2022, Makiko Nagaoka

4th
Date

♡ Ryuto
♡ Runa ♡

You Were Experienced,

I Was Not: OUR DATING STORY



SEKIYA SHUGO

characters

KASHIMA
RYUTO

TANIKITA
AKARI

KUROSE
MARIA

SHIRAKAWA
RUNA

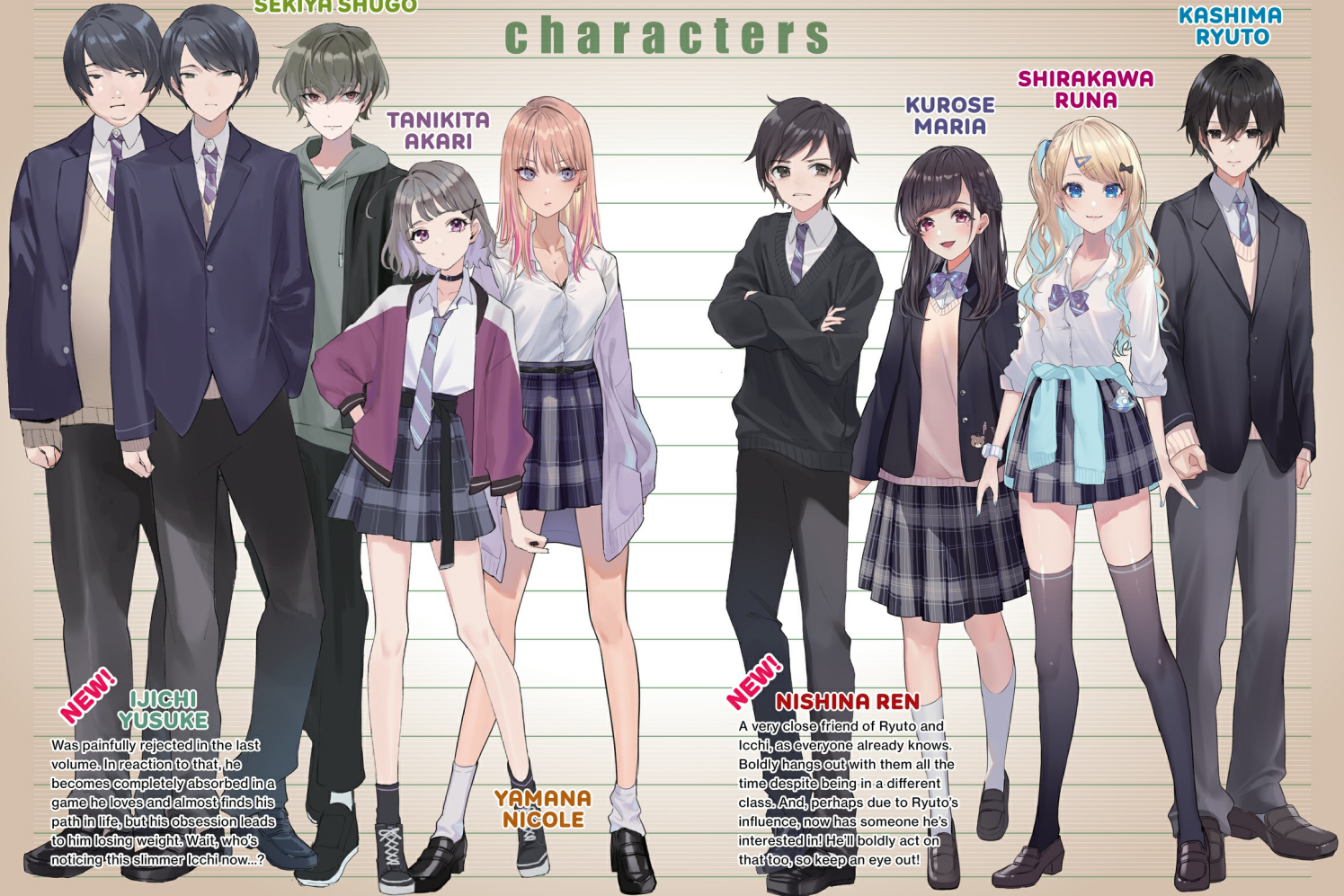
NEW!
IICHI
YUSUKE

Was painfully rejected in the last volume. In reaction to that, he becomes completely absorbed in a game he loves and almost finds his path in life, but his obsession leads to him losing weight. Wait, who's noticing this slimmer Icchi now...?

YAMANA
NICOLE

NEW!
NISHINA REN

A very close friend of Ryuto and Icchi, as everyone already knows. Boldly hangs out with them all the time despite being in a different class. And, perhaps due to Ryuto's influence, now has someone he's interested in! He'll boldly act on that, too, so keep an eye out!





*They had finally managed
to go back to being **real** sisters.*

May this year be a happy one...!



4th
Date

You Were

Experienced,

I Was Not:

OUR DATING STORY

Makiko
Nagaoka

Artist / magako





4th
Date

♡ Ryuto
♡ Runa ♡

You Were Experienced,

I Was Not: OUR DATING STORY



SEKIYA SHUGO

characters

KASHIMA
RYUTO

TANIKITA
AKARI

KUROSE
MARIA

SHIRAKAWA
RUNA

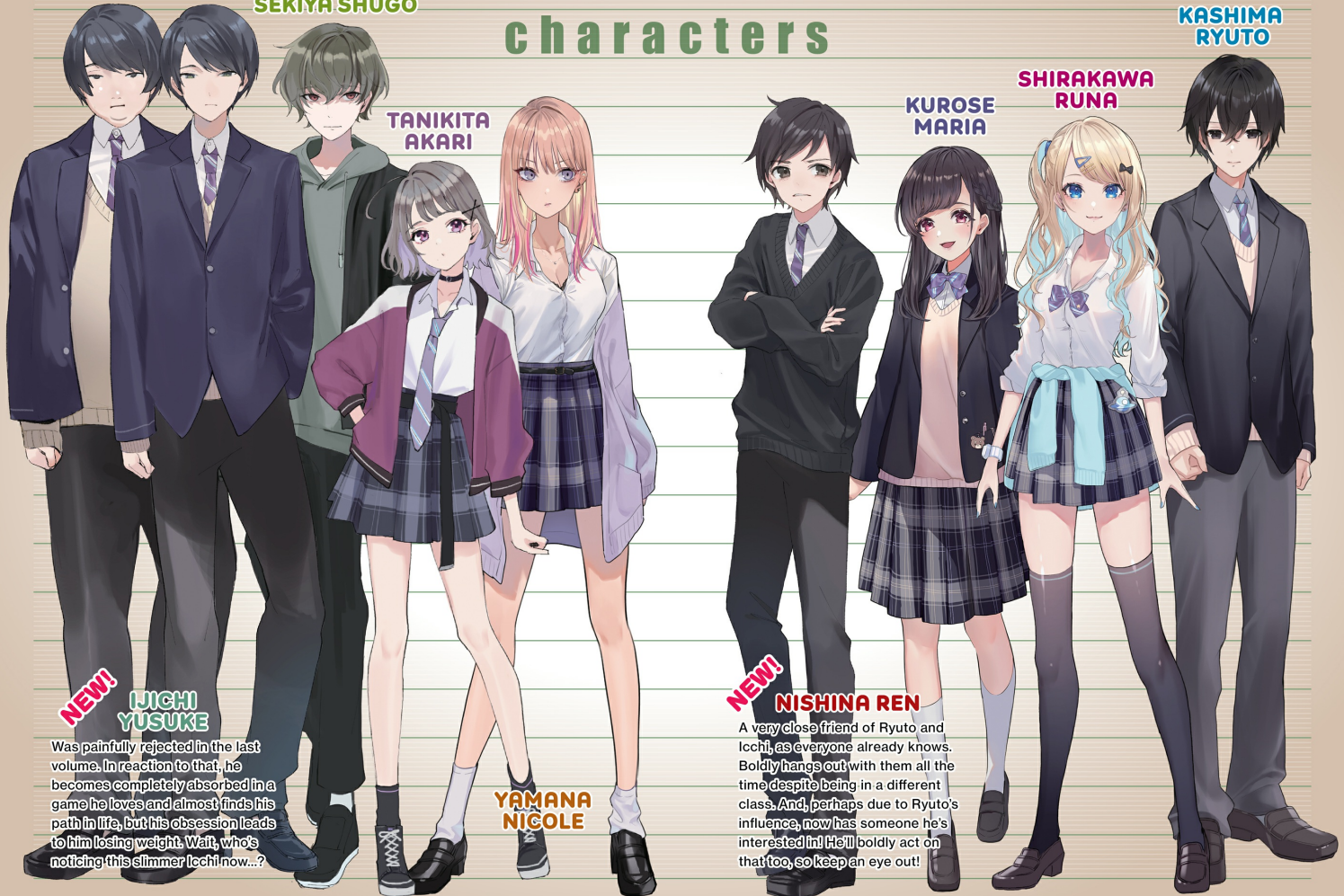
NEW!
IICHI
YUSUKE

Was painfully rejected in the last volume. In reaction to that, he becomes completely absorbed in a game he loves and almost finds his path in life, but his obsession leads to him losing weight. Wait, who's noticing this slimmer Ichii now...?

YAMANA
NICOLE

NEW!
NISHINA REN

A very close friend of Ryuto and Ichii, as everyone already knows. Boldly hangs out with them all the time despite being in a different class. And, perhaps due to Ryuto's influence, now has someone he's interested in! He'll boldly act on that too, so keep an eye out!

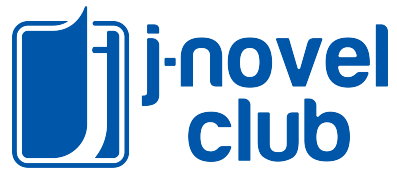




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You Were Experienced, I Was Not: Our Dating Story 4th Date by Makiko Nagaoka

Translated by Adam Edited by T. Burke

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KEIKEN ZUMI NA KIMI TO, KEIKEN ZERO NA ORE GA, OTSUKIAI SURU HANASHI. Vol. 4

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